



# Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue #1

NOVEMBER 2008

MIKE W. BARR  
DEREK RUTHERFORD      JEFFREY SCOTT SIMS





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## EDITORIAL: GENESIS

Nathan Shumate

It's taken me fifteen years to get this issue out.

It was in the early '90s that I originally thought of starting a small magazine with pulp horror leanings, something that acknowledged Lovecraft and Howard and the other Golden Age masters of the craft without being devoted to straight pastiches. I even had the title picked out, *Arkham Tales*. I gathered some info about printing and publishing rates and did some back-of-envelope calculations about page count and production costs and per-word rates... and the numbers told me to let it die. This was, you recall in the dimly-lit era in which the internet had yet to impinge upon the consciousness of the average American (or even the average American college student, which I was at the time), and I could not figure out how I could efficiently approach prospective advertisers or advertise the presence of the magazine to potential readers without a massive outlay of capital that I simply didn't have. (Did I mention I was a student at the time? A married student, too, with a child on the way.)

So the idea went into the holding pool where idle fancies bounce against other half-formed and malformed plans that you'd like to get back to someday, later, when you've got time and leisure.

And what caused that idea to pop back out of the holding pool? Not time and leisure, I can tell you. In fact, the very opposite: an awareness of limited time, of fleeting life. I had a stroke in February of 2008, at the ripe old age of thirty-six; I lost, in the course of an afternoon, the feeling and use of most of the left side of my body and the ability to swallow or to speak over a hoarse whisper. Cognitive functions were unimpaired (or at least no more impaired than they had been beforehand), and after steady improvement during a week in the hospital, I was sent home to continue recuperating. I walked with a cane for about three weeks, the numbness in my limbs and face gradually went away, and my voice got stronger, though I didn't sound like myself for months. As of this writing, there are really no symptoms left, although my voice tires easily if I try to sing for any length of time

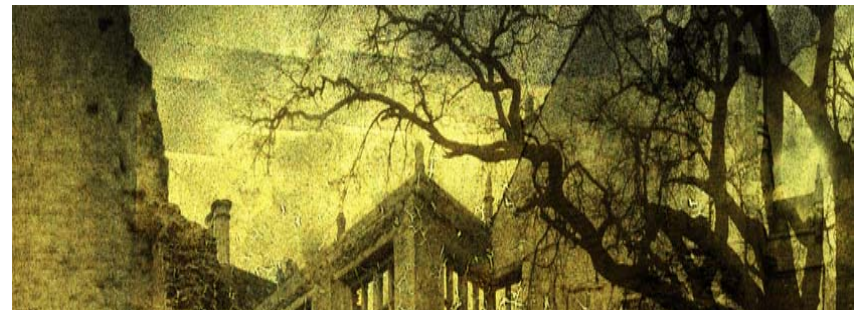
(a pity, as I had a voice which could make the angels weep for joy).

I didn't have any big life-changing epiphanies or come-to-Jesus moments from my stroke, but I did realize that life is a finite prospect, and it can come to an abrupt end very suddenly, or change so much that it morphs into something you can't recognize. So maybe I'd better get off my duff and tackle some of those creative projects I had always intended to accomplish someday once the things I putter with daily somehow no longer take up as much time. Should I finally write that novel? Finish those screenplays?

Or maybe start that magazine?

The environment for small-press publishers is entirely different than it had been when I originally dallied with the idea. Thanks to PDF format and the ubiquity of high-speed internet connections, it's possible to design and distribute a paper-free publication with very few deficiencies in format control and readability compared to print publications. With the cost of paper and shipping taken out of the equation, the numbers changed dramatically. All I had to juggle financially was advertisers and authors, and the internet made communicating with both of those so much easier that I can't imagine putting together a magazine without that kind of communication.

My only regret is that I cannot refer to the magazine "that you hold in your hands," because you aren't holding it. (Unless you printed a hardcopy. Or unless you're using an ebook reader which plays well with PDF.) But however you're seeing it, I welcome you to *Arkham Tales*, and whatever the future holds, I can guarantee that the second issue will come out a lot more quickly than the first. ●





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## TALKING ABOUT CHET BAKER

Derek Rutherford

She opened the door and saw Rupert standing there, smiling, one arm still in plaster, trumpet case under the other.

"Rupert."

"You have to come with me, Sanya. You *have* to see this."

His breathing was fast and audible. His eyes glistened, his cheeks glowed, and every part of his body was in motion, his weight going from foot to foot as if he needed the toilet, his right hand clenched into a fist and moving up and down like he was shaking dice. His lips... he was struggling to prevent his smile from erupting into a laugh.

"Rupert." Last time she'd seen him he'd been in a hospital bed. He was up and about far sooner than she'd expected.

"Sanya, this is unreal. I mean this is totally unreal."

She felt guilty. She should have visited him when he'd been at home recovering. "I've been meaning to come round," she said.

"It doesn't matter." He paused. "In fact..."

Concern creased her forehead. "In fact, what?"

"Being on my own—you know, except for mother—gave me time."

"Time for what?"

"To practice, Sanya. What else?"

"You had... you've got a broken arm."

Now a laugh did break free from his smile. "That's just it."

She shook her head. "Rupert, you're not making sense."

"I know. I know. Look, it'll be easier if I show you. Come on, come with me."

His blatant excitement was at odds with the Rupert she knew. No... it wasn't his excitement. It was the fervour in his eyes. Intensity came off him like heat from a fire; and it scared her. But such fear was nonsense. He was thirteen years old. They were both thirteen years old. He was the boy who'd reached grade eight on the trumpet before they even got to Cavalier High. She was the shy girl from the other side of the world who liked to talk to him, who found something in him—something interesting, something unique—that no one else saw.

If anything, he was the one who should be scared. Being friends with her didn't do him any good. They beat him up because of it. Though she knew it was just one of many excuses they could have given. The thing was, he didn't seem to mind. To him it appeared a small price to pay. A bloody nose, a black eye, tears that he couldn't control but meant more to others than they did to him. They'd beat him up for talking to the Indian girl, he'd limp home, and phone her up to talk about some obscure trumpeter he'd discovered on the web, as if nothing had happened.

"Come on," he said again.

"Where are we going?"

"Prague Fields. Where else?" He said it as if she could read his mind, as if she already knew and understood everything that had happened in his world in the month just gone by.

"Rupert..."

"What?"

"You can't go back there. You'll... you've still got the cast on."

"I can play."

"Rupert, we're not going to Prague Fields at all. We're definitely not going there for you to play."

He nodded. He smiled. He shook his clenched fist again. "That's exactly what we're doing." Then, just for a moment, the joy slipped from his face. "You do want to come, don't you?"

"I don't even want you to go."

"I'm going."

"Rupert, they'll kill you. You know what they said last time."

"Don't you trust me?"

"What's trust got to do with it?"

Sometimes talking to him frustrated her beyond belief. He was miles ahead of her. He was miles ahead of everyone, answering questions people didn't even know they were going to ask. It was half the trouble. He always thought people were keeping up with him, yet his mind was going off at tangents no one else could have conceived of, at a pace that nobody else could even do their ten-times table at.

"You're worried about me," he said, and she could see him forcing himself to slow down.

"Can you blame me?"

"No. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being concerned."

"You don't have to thank me."

"But it's okay."

"What's okay?"

"You don't have to be worried about me anymore."

"Rupert," she said. "What are you talking about?"

"Come on," he said. "I'll explain on the way."

At the point on Lancaster Drive where the last shop—Sharma's Grocery, with the wire mesh over the window—gave way to boarded up houses, Rupert looked across the street at the crumbling redbrick structure that had once housed Johnson Bearings. The name, in peeling white lettering, could still be seen above the main door. "Let's go in here," he said. "I'll show you what I mean."

None of what he'd told her so far made sense. It wasn't that she didn't understand it. She simply didn't believe it.

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin," he'd said.

"Who?"

"It's an old folk tale. There's more truth in it than people think."

She'd told him that, without meaning to cause offence, maybe it was more than just his arm that got damaged last time they went to Prague Fields.

They found a break in the wire fence and squeezed through into the Johnson yard.

"Isn't this trespassing?" she said. She felt a mixture of fear and excitement. Breaking into properties was what the boys who snapped Rupert's arm did.

"It's okay," he said, and she sensed that a mundane thought such as trespass law was so far down in his mind that it had barely registered.

They walked along the side of the red brick building.

"What are we looking for?"

"A way in."

"Rupert..." Being in the yard was one thing, being inside a factory where you weren't meant to be was something else altogether. Being enclosed, out of sight, anything could happen.

At the rear of the building wine bottles were scattered over the ground. A dirty and sodden sleeping bag lay unfurled in one of the doorways. The smell of stale urine hung in the air.

"I don't like it," she said.

"You wanted proof."

"I know, but—"

He raised a hand. "There," he whispered.

"What?"

"On those pallets."

The rat hadn't yet seen them. It was busy gnawing at something it held between its front claws.

"This is crazy," she said.

"Shush."

Rupert lowered his trumpet case to the ground. He released one steel catch silently, flicked the second, but didn't stop the spring action, and the catch snapped open with a sound both metallic and loud.

The rat looked up, dropped whatever it had been eating, and vanished.

"It's gone," Sanya said, relieved.

"It's okay."

"Look—"

"It's all right. Watch."

He opened the case, took out the trumpet, handling it with a practiced ease that was nonchalant and yet almost a caress. He slotted the mouthpiece home, raised the trumpet, and worked the valves several times. She saw him moisten his lips, and then press the trumpet to them the way he had already done a million times.

He started to play.

The sound was soft, so soft that she could hardly distinguish between the notes and the breath that was creating them.

He paused, smiled at her, but his eyes were elsewhere.

"Remind me to tell you about Chet Baker," he said, and there was reverence in his voice. "He's where I got this."

But before she could answer the music was coming again. Murmured low notes, smoothly joined, repeated phrases, stronger tones intermittently, jumping from low to high, now a little louder, staccato in places, none of it to any particular rhythm but there was something there, something insistent, something almost... elemental. Suddenly the notes weren't even recognisable. She'd listened to him for hours, hundreds of hours, but she'd never heard him play these notes before, this melody... this piece—it could scarcely be called a melody. Bent notes, notes that might have worked on her uncle's sitar, but oughtn't to have emerged out of a brass instrument from Paris.

The rat came back.

It might have been back for a few moments. She'd not been looking

at the pallet. She'd been watching Rupert. A movement caught her eye and when she turned there the creature was. No, two rats were there. Three, in fact.

Now a fourth.

From the gap at the bottom of a broken doorframe another pair appeared.

They were all over the pile of pallets. And they were all perfectly still, all staring at Rupert, red eyes hypnotised.

After a few more phrases that felt as slippery and supple as eels Rupert let the sound fade and die.

He held the trumpet a few inches from his lips and for a moment it felt as if there was something tangible in the air, something you could reach out and touch. She wouldn't have been surprised if stardust had appeared twinkling in the atmosphere.

For several long seconds the magic continued to exist in the silence.

One of the rats twitched its whiskers. Another raised its snout heavenwards, almost a puzzled look in its eyes. Then one swished its tale and jumped from the bottom pallet. Within two seconds they were all gone, a magic of their own. It was as if they'd never been.

Rupert smiled at her.

"Believe me now?" he said.

He was talking about Chet Baker again.

"They smashed his teeth out," Rupert said. "He couldn't play. You know... this was a man for whom... playing was his life. Playing was everything."

"You said afterwards he could play even better."

"Yes. But he had to find a new way to play."

"What's all this to do with—"

"They never found them."

"Who?"

"The people that did it."

"That smashed his teeth?"

"Yep. You read about it and there's a lot of people who don't even believe it happened."

"But you believe? Even though they never found them?"

"That's it, Sanya. That's exactly it."

"And what's this got to do with rats?"

"What you just saw, Sanya. What I just did. That was... nothing."

He led her down a straight passageway made crooked by wheelie bins, pushchairs, broken mountain bikes, and bin bags. Even in mid-afternoon the passageway was dark. She felt crushed by the pressure of fifteen stories of concrete above her and suffocated by the stench of rotten food and animal waste.

She realised she was holding his hand, his bad hand. Or, rather, his bad arm. She tried to pull him backwards, just the tiniest of pressure, enough to tell him everything about how she felt but too little to hurt him. He ignored her and carried on through the tunnel.

They came out into the large square formed within the four tower blocks of Prague Fields. Concrete paving slabs, split by weeds and discoloured by chewing gum and aerosol paint, covered the entire area, save for small strips of weed-infested grass along the front of each tower. In the middle of the square a concrete sculpture that might have represented two lovers or may just have been an experiment in curves and holes looked old and out of place. Three quarters of the square was darkened by the shade of the tower blocks. On one corner of the sculpture's base a group of boys—all hooded—sat sharing cigarettes.

"Rupert," she whispered. "There's still time to go back. This is... Rupert this is stupid." She'd been going to say suicide, but was too scared to even vociferate the idea.

But there wasn't still time.

"Look who the fuck it is," one of the hoodies said.

The other boys looked round.

"I thought we told you and your Paki girlfriend to stay away," one said, rising and smiling as if Rupert's disobeying of his previous order made him happier than if Rupert had done as they'd requested.

"Follow me," Rupert said, leading her along the edge of the tower block they'd come in beneath. If his arm was hurting he was oblivious to it.

"Where are we going?"

"He's even brought his trumpet this time," one of the hoodies said. "Fucking gay boy."

Rupert walked quickly, past splintered and peeling doors, grubby windows, some laundry hanging on a white plastic frame, the smell of frying. One doorway was open and Sanya heard a baby howling inside. In the middle of the square all of the boys were standing now, taking final drags on their cigarettes, flicking the butts away, hitching their trousers up and pushing their hands deep into their anorak pockets. A couple of them had bottles of beer. They were laughing and

taking their time. They'd been bored and were now savouring this unexpected entertainment.

"In here," Rupert said.

"Rupert, no..."

It was going wrong too quickly. He'd been so happy, so insistently happy, that despite all of her common sense and intuition she'd been swept along with him. Even the sun had been out. But now it felt like they'd left the light on the other side of that passageway. And it was going to be worse than before. That much was obvious. Last time had been bad. This time... she couldn't even think about it. And here he was leading them *into* one of the buildings. One of *their* buildings.

It really could be suicide.

It wasn't a flat that he led her into, but into the hallway where two graffiti covered lift doors awaited them. Concrete stairs, behind blue-painted fire doors, rose up alongside the lift shaft. They went through the fire doors, but instead of taking the stairs up they went down.

Their footsteps echoed as they descended one flight, around a concrete landing and down again.

"Rupert, what's down here?"

"Boilers," he said. "Pipes. Storage. Laundry stuff."

He must have already been here, she thought. He must have worked all of this out.

At the bottom of the second flight there were more fire doors. He burst through them. Here it was darker still, just a small fluorescent tube screwed into a smashed Exit sign above the door.

"Rupert, please..." She didn't know what it was she was asking of him. Certainly it was too late to retrace their steps. Wasn't that the upstairs door she had just heard slam?

He pulled her past storage cages—this one holding a mouldering sofa, that one full with taped-up cardboard boxes. She noticed a room to the left, also lit by a single bulb, several huge washing machines and driers in there. They went through one more door, and this room was much warmer, hot even. She could make out pipes and wires and metal frames bolted high up on the walls, steel cabinets against one wall, a huge pair of metal doors set into another, the heat coming through those. Against one wall there was a pile of old blankets. The room smelled of oil and of damp and of steam.

He stood with his back against the wall at the far end of the room. She could hear the sound of rushing—she didn't know if it was air,

water or steam behind the steel doors, or simply the blood in her own ears.

She hadn't realised it until that moment but she was crying.

Rupert, on his knees, opened the trumpet case, slipped the mouthpiece home, moistened his lips.

She heard voices from the room outside. Laughter. Someone putting on a high childlike voice. Somebody saying "Mummy. Mummy." More laughter.

Rupert started to play just as the door opened, just as the first one said, "You're fucked, trumpet boy."

The notes sounded wrong. They were harsh, the opposite of what he'd demonstrated earlier. Now the tone was edgy. Whereas before she'd imagined it was his breath that she could hear, now it was his anger. He played rapidly, too. More rapidly than she could hear.

"We're going to ram that fucking horn right up... ah, fuck off. Shit!"

She couldn't see the boy who had spoken—several of them crowded the doorway.

Rupert played faster, louder. So loud that she couldn't hear what the boys were saying. She thought she heard a scream. She definitely heard someone shouting.

Rupert twisted notes into shapes that weren't music, shapes that seemed to fly through the air with a physical presence. Dangerous shapes.

Was that a bark? A howl? Or was it just imagination?

And now there were rats again. They came from beneath the bundles of blankets in the corner. They came through a broken grill high up in the wall. They came from between the legs of the boys in the doorway. And they were big rats. Bigger than those Rupert had enticed earlier. A screaming filled the air. Maybe it was the boys. Maybe Rupert's trumpet. Maybe the rats. She clasped her hands over her ears.

One of the boys stumbled into the room, stepped on a rat and fell forward, reached an arm out yet still smashed his head on the floor. Another boy followed. A rat the size of a small cat clung to his ankle. He tripped over the first boy. Rats swarmed over both of them. In the semi-darkness they flailed their arms and screamed. Another boy appeared, hands gripping the doorframe as if he was being pulled inside, and knew that he must resist at all costs. A rat was clamped on the crotch of his jeans.

"Rupert!" Sanya screamed, needing him to stop—whatever the cost

— but knowing that this is what he'd wanted her to see all along.

He blew a phrase that was too high, too fast, too staccato, to be possible, broke briefly for breath, and in that pause she definitely heard a growl. He played again and she felt something wet touch her cheek. When she raised a hand it came away spotted with blood. Rupert's eyes were closed, his head back, his fingers dancing on the trumpet valves. He looked relaxed, he looked happy... no, it was more than that. He looked impassioned.

The floor was speckled with blood, even in the low lighting she could see the drops growing. It was almost as if something that had happened just outside the room had filled the entire atmosphere with blood.

She looked back at the door, back at the boys still flailing on the floor. No, one of them was motionless now. Nobody was trying to get in anymore. Where were the rest of them?

As if to answer her question, Rupert paused again, and she heard screaming coming from the room outside.

Was that someone calling for his mother?

Someone weeping?

The floor was a moving mass of rats, all but the few feet in front of her and Rupert.

And Rupert played on.

Afterwards, she knew it would never be the same between them again. Not that it had ever been anything. Or was she already trying to alter the history they'd shared? Because now, in his own way, Rupert was as bad—worse, even—than the people that had bullied and beaten him. God knew where he had found whatever it was he had stumbled across. God knew where he had practiced and how hard he had worked to make it do what it had done. God knew and Rupert knew, too. Just the two of them, and maybe that other trumpet player whose name she had already forgotten.

It was too much to take in, too much to comprehend.

Too much to even believe.

He leaned against the wall with a dreamy look on his face and the trumpet hanging loosely in his left hand. There were three boys on the floor, none moving. The floor, the walls, the ceiling even, were covered in blood. The smell, the warm sweet metallic smell was strong enough to mask the dampness; the dampness that now seemed as sweet as the cool air somewhere above them, somewhere miles away from Prague



Fields.

The boys no longer even looked like boys, just piles of rags like those in the corner.

The rats were gone. Rupert had played a phrase that had sounded like a bastardised version of “Somewhere Over The Rainbow” and the rats had disappeared. Not literally, but she wouldn’t have been shocked if it had happened that way.

“I think they’re dead,” she said. She wiped tears from her eyes. Her hands were trembling and she could taste bile in her throat.

She turned to him, fury in her eyes.

“I think they’re—”

“I never touched them,” he said.

She wanted to hit him, to thrash him. She wanted to pound her fists against his chest until she had undone everything that had just happened.

“Why, Rupert? Why?”

“Because... because I can,” he said.

“I don’t believe... I didn’t know you were capable.”

“They should have stopped, Sanya. They should have stopped a long time ago.” She felt a tear roll down her cheek. How little she’d really understood about him.

“I’m not the first,” he said, as if it was an excuse, and for a moment his expression weakened as if the knowledge of what he’d done had finally reached him.

“What do you mean?”

“Chet,” he said, and smiled again, and this time there was something in that smile that caused her to tighten her hands into fists, raise her arms, and to scream.

And then she saw terror cross his face.

He saw it over her shoulders even as her first blow slammed against his chest. She saw his face whiten, saw him go to say something—maybe a prayer, she thought later—but whatever else he had lost in that tower block basement his reactions weren’t amongst them. Within a second the trumpet was at his lips, the notes tumbling out, cascading like rocks down a mountainside.

She dared not turn round.

Rupert seemed to be searching for something. The right notes, the right order, the right articulation. His eyes were wide and terrified but his fingers and mouth were strong.

Yet the notes, the order, the articulation weren’t there.

She felt the floor tremble. Something was behind her. The hairs on the nape of her neck bristled with electricity. She felt a warmth there, too, as it—whatever it was—breathed on her. She smelt this breath, this earthy and rotten breath, and it made her gag. She could feel, rather than hear, its heartbeat.

She wanted to scream. Every nerve ending, every sinew, every tendon, muscle and organ cried out for release. But she was paralysed. Maybe his music was doing that. Maybe it was doing that to her instead of *it*.

And then Rupert found what he had been searching for. His eyes relaxed and a second later she felt the heartbeat behind her disappear, the foul breath lessen.

Rupert stepped around her, still playing, and she stood there facing the wall where he had been, the one part of the wall that wasn’t covered with blood.

He was beyond her field of vision now. Her ears told her that he was walking across the room. She prayed he wouldn’t slip, smash against the floor, lose the trumpet... even for just a few seconds.

Now he was at the doorway. The tone changed as he left the room.

And she found the courage to turn.

She wasn’t sure what she saw. He was in the doorway driving it backwards, just a shape, a black shape, possibly brown. Something with fur. Maybe scales. Something upright. Something far taller than Rupert.

He stepped into the cage room, and then turned to his right. He was driving it into the laundry room.

“What is it?” she whispered, in a room that had seen a thousand rats kill three boys.

He paused, and in that split second she heard it growl, a low and dark and... unearthly sound.

He started playing again.

“Rupert, what should I do?”

“Go,” he said, and then blew three quick notes. “Run, Sanya. Run!”

For a moment she hesitated. There must be more... there must be something. But whatever it was, it wasn’t anything Rupert could discuss. Not now. Not when any pause could be deadly.

“Run!” he said again.

And then it all came flooding over her, the impossibility of it drowned beneath the truth of it. The knowledge seemed to open a dark

hole in her mind.

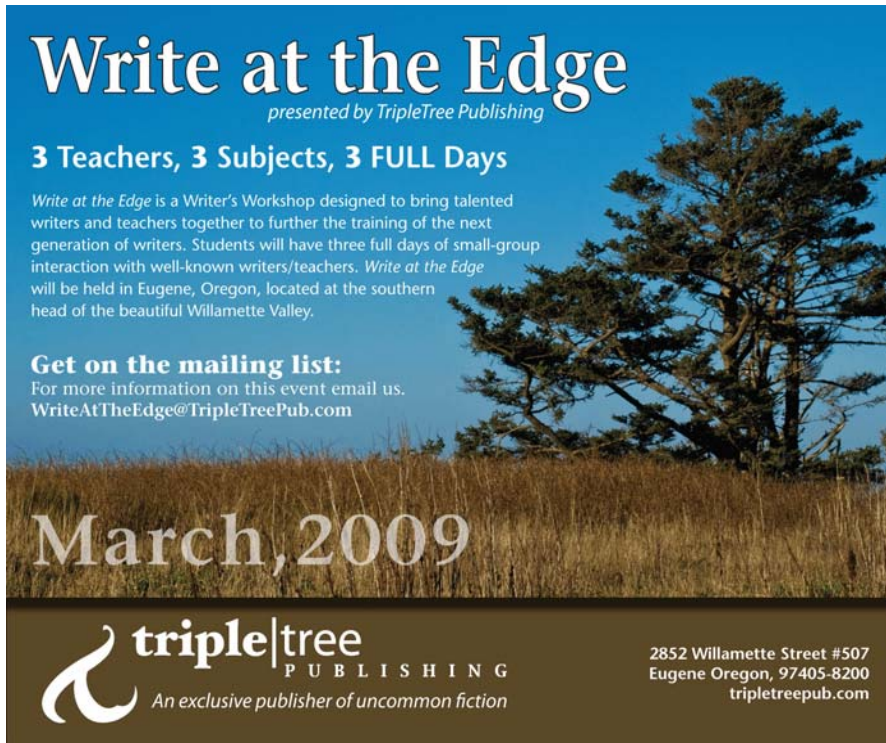
And she ran.

She ran without looking in the laundry room. She ran between the storage cages, her feet sliding on the floor slick with blood. She ran up the stairs. Out into the light. She ran across the deserted square, through the passage way and into the world beyond Prague Fields.

As she ran Rupert's playing echoed endlessly inside her head. It was the only sound she could hear and it pushed all other thoughts from her mind.

Except she wondered how long he could keep playing for.

And she wondered what would happen when, finally, he had to stop.●



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## PICKMAN'S PROGENY: THE HORRID TRUTH BELOW

Robert Masterson

You ask me if I remember how we used to ride in the very front cars on the subway, pretend we were driving the train, pretend we were in control, back before the success and before the money and when we still road the trains. You ask me when was the last time I have ridden that way. Pour yourself another glass of port, old friend, for it's the last bottle in my cellar. For God's sake, light that cigar instead of letting it just hang out of your mouth; it's the last of the Cubans. Start smoking and I'll tell you about the last time I rode in the very front of the very front car of the subway train and why I'll never do so again.

Graffiti changed in the 70s, remember? It was the birth of wildstyle and the ghost of Vaughn Bodé stalked the Lower East Side, branding the sides of building, bus, train, and tunnel. Everything, whether moving or stationary, was tagged, decorated, illustrated, storified, politicized, aestheticized, or otherwise adorned. Everything, whether organic or man-made, seemed to wear a coat of spray paint. And for every Keith Herring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, there were 10,000 others and far less talented scrambling through the night with their satchels of purloined paint and super jumbo markers seeking aerosol expression.

Those were crazy days and I remember watching white-powder deals transpire between white-lipped junkies and the local supply, an anonymous hand that reached up from a storm drain to take money and deliver drugs. It was way before crack.

Summer nights when the city just lay gasping and indolent beneath the filthy, wet heat, we would bounce from bar to apartment to loft to bar, music pounding all the time, torn t-shirts and safety-pins, spikes and gripes, white noise and black hair dye. The Ramones wrote our anthem, Talking Heads interpreted our dreams, Blondie asked us to dance, Devo introduced us to our destiny, Eno was a god, the Sex Pistols were our stooges, and the Stooges were our elders. Nothing made more sense than nonsense and we excelled at chaos.

So it was with the usual nihilistic buoyancy we boarded the train

that (what's a word that means "sweltering" but ten times so; what's another way to say "brutal, aggressively hot, hellish, and virulently foul") night in August. My 22-year-old's version of seduction dependent upon privacy, I pulled Daisy Mae away from the group with a promise of adventure and, in those days, the only thing worse than being ugly was being boring. Through car after car after car, I dragged her forward through each double set of graffiti-etched doors, across each gap with jostling couplings just inches below our feet and I hoped the joining of the subway cars put ideas into her head about coupling and jostling.

When we reached the very front of the very first car and stood at the only forward facing window on the train, stood just inches from the motorman locked in his motorman's booth with his hand on his deadman's switch, I put my arm around Daisy Mae's waist and pulled her closer to me, soft flesh damp beneath damp Fruit-of-the-Loom cotton.

"How fast do you want to go?" I asked her.

"Faster," she replied. "Always faster. No matter what, faster."

And for some reason, the car sped up and we stood there swaying together, sweaty young bodies pressed together, and I was afraid I was getting a hard-on and afraid she would notice and thrilled that she would. We watched our own reflections, wet matted hair and pale faces and glints of silver, superimposed over the image carved by lamplight into the tunnel. I certainly did not pay attention to graffiti flashing by; it was a multicolored, ubiquitous background scrawl signifying nothing.

So I cannot tell you exactly when the neo-primitive obscenities of modern urban flash became replaced by something more Neolithic. The random-seeming letters and numbers of our many tribes' jabber was infiltrated and soon supplanted by another tribes' images of fat times and famine. The images I retain from my fragmentary glimpses of their passing are of rage and terror, hunger and violence, raw meat and bloody hands. Like a Lascaux Cavern of the insane, these crude murals unfurled like a demented cyclorama telling stories of the hunt, of the slaughter, and of the unholy feasts to follow where stalker and butcher and beast all appeared human.

Under what exact street and avenue that shift from 20th century punk tag to nightmare prehistoric cave painting occurred, I cannot say. I had my hand down the front of Daisy Mae's daisy dukes and my fingers inside Daisy Mae and my tongue explored the long hard tendon

of her shoulder. So did my teeth, but only a little bit, and just hard enough to make her squirm. My tastes then, in contrast to my costume of punk anti-finery, were simpler.

It was the frozen image of something, something I don't want to know, that took me from my pleasure. For one eternal second I saw a thing there in the tracks a gleam with headlight glow and I will never not see it again. As if burned into my retina, I still raise my eyes to a thing clad in pale leather loincloth, lifting its head in fatal surprise from its awful feast there on the tracks, eyes wide and screaming and glowing in chorus to the screaming brakes, in pain from the awful stabbing light, in a rage at a meal interrupted and, baboon or madman, mole person or demon, friend or terrible foe, what shall always remain behind my eyelids is the horrible image of its scant clothing and the terrible remnants of a tanned human face there covering its loins.

The rest of that evening is forgotten and Daisy Mae long gone. She said she never saw the thing that I saw and I believed her and I hated her for it.

So, my friend, let us savor the last of this fine port, the taste of contraband tobacco, and never, dear fellow, never ask me of the subway again. ●





# THE HOUSE ON THE HILL OF STARS

Jeffery Scott Sims

“There is nothing intrinsically menacing,” said Professor Anton Vorchek, “in the appearance of the Wilson House. It is not especially old, having been raised in the forties, nor is its structure alarmingly outré—no marble gargoyles, no hanging eaves, no tottering gables. Yet this former abode, this blandly-styled Wilson House, bears the disquieting reputation for being haunted, and I dare say it does conceal remarkable secrets of a sort. These secrets, Miss Delaney, I mean to unlock, with your aid.”

“I’m game, I suppose,” replied Theresa Delaney, “although I’m sure you haven’t told all. For starters, what about him?” She cocked an extended thumb at the third one present, a young, shabbily-dressed personage with a cynical smile, unshaven face, and backward baseball cap. She said wryly, “Introductions are in order.”

“Ah, yes,” said Vorchek. “Mr. Gale, thank you for joining us. This will mark your first exposure to the prime facts in the case, and I prefer to deliver one comprehensive presentation to all. That is why I called you both to my home, where, in the comfort of my parlor, we may speak frankly. Anyway, Miss Delaney, Mr. Ronald Gale, one of my faithful graduate students.”

The youth said, “Call me Ronny. Actually, I’m taking one of his classes as an elective, but it’s great fun, if you’re into that stuff.” Theresa extended a limp hand. Ronny seized it, working it like a water pump.

“Pleased to meet you,” the girl said, with a certain reserve.

Vorchek continued, “Mr. Gale, Miss Theresa Delaney, a special student of mine, of sorts, and my devoted assistant. I am sure she can be of great help to you. She knows something of my ways, and my proclivities.”

“Suits me,” replied Ronny, bobbing his head with a spastic motion and chuckling. “I’m game.” Certainly he might well be. The invitation to Vorchek’s solitary home could approximate an honor, for the professor was a powerful individual within his field, noted for the

imaginative quality of his scientific views and an impressive figure of mature maleness to boot—ever tastefully dressed in a fine old-fashioned suit, his strong, hawk-like features, his black hair turning iron-gray at the temples, his short, well clipped goatee—but Theresa was something else again. Young, blonde, beautiful, in an age of aggressive proletarianism she, born into wealth and ease, chose to affect the most elegant and eye-catching of attire, being dressed at this time in a blouse and skirt ensemble of pink and maroon, with taupe hose and glossy black boots, and a little dark olive hat surmounting her full long hair. Ronny seemed amazed by her. Indeed, during the lecture that followed, an outside viewer might have suspected him of paying more attention to her than to the stirring narrative.

“All right, then,” said Vorchek, in his pleasant, precisely modulated, slightly accented voice. “My dear, refresh my cup, if you would. More coffee, Mr. Gale? So, to business. We venture on Friday to the Wilson House. Its reputation, I think, is misplaced, for I expect to find the locale more intriguing than the structure. I begin the tale with the erection of the house, although that can not be the true beginning. The site, a low, broad hill far off the main highway, south of Sedona beyond Oak Creek, was purchased in 1941 by James Wilson, the great man himself, he of the Wilson Copper Mine, still a going concern, in those days a fabulously profitable enterprise. Mr. Wilson grew wealthy, developed a desire for the choicer frills of the good life. He wished to build for his wife and two children a fancy retreat, a haven from the noise and bustle of the big city. He selected the land which was then semi-forested cattle country, hired the expertise of Rondeleur, the famous Southwestern architect, and recruited laborers among the itinerant Yavapai Apaches of the region. The style of the house is rather interesting, being designed to mimic in its basic outlines the prehistoric Indian pueblos of the area. Its construction, carried out in the milder seasons, took four years. When it was done the remaining workmen were treated to a celebratory feast. Then the Wilson family moved in for the summer. June of 1945, that was. It was to be the last summer of their lives.

“I don’t believe that the late Mr. Wilson had any inkling of difficulties in store. To be sure, there are reports that some of his Yavapai crew disliked his intentions, claiming that the site was sacred ground. The new owner of the property heard some of their stories, may have heard more, but what of that? Can we blame him if, as I deduce, he ignored those fellows? There is scarcely a patch of ground within

twenty miles of Sedona which is not held sacred by somebody. The house was built, the Wilsons did move in. That much is history.

"The Indian legends are not, but it is they that fascinate me. Old legends, recorded by scholars of yesteryear, and whispered accounts picked up and repeated by Mr. Wilson, identify the eminence upon which he erected his house as the Hill of Stars, the traditional sacred place of the Yotapai, the extinct tribe pre-dating the Yavapai. As Mr. Wilson told it, that was the hill where the olden ones gathered to watch the stars. The legends provide a very different picture, explain the name in a wholly different fashion. They describe the ancient function of the hill in unique terms.

"Forgive me, my friends, but I wander. I meant to tell you of the mystery surrounding the fate of the Wilson family. Mystery it is, and nothing more, you see. They settled into the house, that abode of luxury, and there they resided for the better part of two months, until they resided there no more. They then left the place, and so far as they were concerned, that was apparently that. It certainly was for the outside world, since the Wilsons vanished from the face of the earth, without trace, never to be seen nor heard from again. And there you have it all, the primary source of the haunted house claim."

Ronny said, "It's a silly story, Professor. Somebody's pulling your leg."

Theresa said, "It is woefully incomplete. Come on, Professor, you can do better than that. What's supposed to have happened to them? What about the Indian stuff? How does that enter into it? Were the Wilsons murdered by their workers, or did ghosts eat them? You must have ideas."

Ronny snickered, patted Theresa on the shoulder (which touch she shrugged off), said, "I go for the ghosts. The house was plunked down on top of an Apache cemetery. There's the answer."

Vorchek waited patiently until they had finished, then said by way of clarification, "I have told you the fundamental facts. Most of the rest is supposition, hearsay, second or third-hand rumor, possibly leavened with deliberate falsehood. I can not tell you now the truth, for I do not know it. We will learn it, when we undertake our expedition to the Wilson House. Be here, ready to go, six o'clock Friday morning."

Came the day. With the sun already creeping over the horizon, the last faint breath of chill dying on the breeze, the trio set out in Professor Vorchek's spacious van, a four-wheel drive behemoth loaded with gear and supplies for a possibly lengthy sojourn at their destination. The

vehicle trundled north, with Vorchek at the wheel, Theresa at his side, Ronny in the rear, from where he pestered the girl with relentless chatter intended to "make an impression," which it did, though not entirely as planned. The van struggled wearily but resolutely, climbing the many miles of interstate, then plunged sharply into the depths of the Verde Valley, where the travelers turned off onto local roads. Having breakfasted in the bustling town of Cottonwood they pushed on up the state highway to the rugged region south of Sedona, the famous vista of the Red Rock Country looming in the distance as they turned off again, this time onto a narrow back road replete with potholes. Their route led them across a lonely, unfrequented corner of Red Rock State Park, a wild and pretty area, and via graded dirt road to the green margins of placidly flowing Oak Creek.

Vorchek explained, "We have been granted permission to pass through the park, which had not been established in Mr. Wilson's day, so long as we do not disturb state property. The current owners of the house—absentee owners, and no relation to the old family—have also graciously permitted access to the house for purposes of scientific research, on the condition that we deface nothing. I have the key. There will be no amenities, save for a roof over our heads, which will count for something during these cool nights. I need not inform you that we have arrived."

Quite so, for across the stream from where they had halted, emerging from a dense, sprawling thicket of scrub and scattered trees, rose the bulk of a broad hill, fairly low and gently sloped except where it approached the creek, at which point it shelved in cliffs of boulders and red earth. Atop the hill stood a house, the only such structure for a mile or more, which the professor's young companions immediately recognized from photographs as the Wilson House. It was, in its own way, an awesome sight. The architect Rondeleur had conceived a modernized version of the stark, angular, fortress-like structures built in that region during the Pre-Columbian Period, a massy pile in two stories that the workmen faced with smooth red sandstone, large slabs of rock wrapped around many large, rectangular windows. The house brooded darkly against the morning sun.

Theresa said, "I can believe its haunted. It looks hundreds of years old."

Vorchek chuckled and responded, "The style is deliberately aged, of course, and, furthermore, it has not been regularly tenanted since the Wilsons left it. Nothing lasts long in these parts without maintenance."

Ronny asked, "Does it have air-conditioning?"

Came the answer, "An electrical system was installed, but that is no more. I warned you that we must rough it."

The rapidly deteriorating dirt road dipped down the rocky bank, across the creek and up the far side. The van did likewise, and despite a tense moment in the middle of the stream clambered up the slippery opposite bank with ease, bouncing along the fading jeep trail that led to the flat top of the hill. In another minute they parked on the east side of the house, before the ornately carved oaken front door. Viewed closely, the house emitted a sad atmosphere of neglect or decay. Weather-gouged splits marred the stone walls, boarding concealed the remnants of several window panes. Rank weeds overwhelmed the surrounding level terrain, revealing mere hints of former lawn and gardens.

"All out!" Vorchek sang boisterously. He slapped a brown fedora on his head, said, "You two, unload the goods. I will try the key, find out if it still performs." A deal of stuff had been heaped into the back of the van. While Vorchek disappeared into the house his companions huffed and puffed in the quickly warming air, hauling onto the cracked, overgrown cement porch the food, bedding, and clothing, the necessary amenities, as well as the bulky scientific apparatus of their mentor. When they had finished Vorchek emerged and said, "Let us carry all inside, then take a break, that we may undertake the grand tour."

Presently they did so, with the professor in the lead. Once upon a time the Wilson House must have been a grand place. Its interior still imposed upon the senses. Furnishings there were none, and the fine appointments exhibited signs of disrepair, yet that which lingered gratified taste. The walls of what must have been the cavernous living room were paneled in rich mahogany, slightly worm-eaten or chewed by beetles, the floor laid with carpet, now soiled, that retained its brightness and beauty in patches. On these surfaces appeared exotic designs like those of the door, fraught with antique Southwestern symbolism: Kokopelli flute players, human stick figures, cartoonish renditions of deer, lizards, and other native animals. The massive fireplace stood empty, though still stained with ancient soot. A glorious electric chandelier hung overhead, dusty and cobwebbed. So it was in other rooms of the ground floor, except for the store rooms, the laundry, and the kitchen, which were marvelously utilitarian with their tools and once up-to-date appliances. The second floor, approached via a sweeping bannistered staircase from the living room, contained

the bedrooms, and a formerly quaint sitting area facing south into a hemispherical bay window, the glass shattered and mainly covered with two-by-four slats. These rooms were also finely appointed, and totally empty of all but dust and the scuttling intrusions of nature.

More heavy lifting conveyed most of the expedition's gear into a walk-in cupboard adjoining the kitchen. In the latter room Theresa made sandwiches for the crew among the dead machinery, while Vorchek organized between mouthfuls. "There is no reason," he mumbled, "why each of us can not have our own bedrooms. There is space for all, to put it mildly, and for many more. I lay claim to the big one overlooking the cliffs by the creek. It will hold me, and my materials, nicely. Foodstuffs we may leave here, sorting the necessities as soon as we get this room cleaned and disinfected. That might be wise for all of the enclosures we choose to inhabit. It is dirty here; furthermore, I detect the faint trace of unpleasant aroma. Miss Delaney, I packed folding aluminum chairs and a cheap folding table. Where would you recommend that we emplace them?"

"The living room," she replied. Though she had sought to restrain herself, Theresa was as ever dressed to the nines. "It's the best room in the house. We may as well treat ourselves."

Ronny, still shabby in the modernist vein, piped up, mouthing around his second sandwich, "It's dark in here. Do we live by flash-light?"

Said Vorchek, "What would you do without me? Provided I also kerosene lamps, and a reasonable quantity of fuel, in addition to a battery-powered desk lamp, which I retain for my writing."

Ronny persisted, "There's no TV, no Internet, nothing. I didn't think to bring a radio. What are we going to do with ourselves, sing camp songs?"

Said the professor, "Perhaps you should have brought a book. Reading, Mr. Gale, has long been a beneficial pastime. Nevertheless, what we will do is work. In the meantime, despite such atrocious lacks, we will manage to live decently during our stay." Then he detailed his companions to various tasks, in order to prepare one and all for their residency.

Theresa had occasion to observe with acerbity, Ronny with foul-mouthed vehemence, that the delegation of duties laid the majority of physical work on their shoulders—the really heavy stuff especially on his—while the professor indulged himself with what he called "vital ruminations." Nevertheless, the efforts of that long day rewarded the



team with a livable habitat, one in which they could operate with the supplies on hand, if need be, for many days. Late that afternoon Vorchek, having explained to Ronny the mechanics of water purification, set the young man to hauling multiple buckets up the hill from the creek, to be dumped into and treated in a big stainless steel canister. While the graduate student grumbled through the hot, tiring ordeal the other two took a break, relaxing seated on stones within a cluster of three tall boulders tightly arranged at a point on the hill's flat summit farthest from the house. There they sipped iced tea, Vorchek puffing on his pipe and fussing over his ever-present notes, Theresa smoking a cigarette and eyeing him dubiously.

She said, "So here we are, and here we stay, I guess, until you learn what you want to know. You still haven't told what we're doing."

"Because," replied Vorchek, "I do not yet know myself. We have entered a zone of strangeness, one wreathed in mystery. There is, I am convinced, knowledge to be acquired. What else can I tell you now?"

Theresa cried, "How about, why we brought *him* along? This Gale person is a boob, I've figured out that much, having had to put up with his moaning and his not-too-subtle passes all day. He knows nothing, nor does he want to do so. Where did you dig him up?"

Vorchek grinned, said, "Mr. Gale has his uses. He makes for a serviceable beast of burden, does not he? He is certainly making life easier for you at the moment. Before we are through he may repay my kind regard in other ways as well."

The topic of discussion appeared, glumly wiping dust from his clothing. "This is where I find you," he sneered. "Well, I've done it all. "Got any beer?"

"No," said Vorchek. "However, a glass of wine after dinner will refresh. Miss Delaney, let us commence that operation." As dusk closed in Theresa supervised by lamplight the preparation of canned roast beef hash on an electric skillet, powered by a battery system rigged by the professor. This entree, supplemented by fresh vegetables and milk from the van's ice chest, satisfied their stomachs if not their palates. Afterward they took it easy in the living room with their glasses of Burgundy. At Vorchek's urging Ronny had filled the fireplace with cut wood and sparked a crackling fire. It sputtered along, the little sounds breaking the otherwise oppressive silence.

"Sweet night," Ronny opined. "Except for slaving, I'm not doing much. Is this it? Is this why I'm here? I hope I'm earning extra credit."

"Tomorrow," said Vorchek, "we commence the delving into the

mystery. While you youngsters have dealt with sundries, I have been analyzing pre-existing data in light of our surroundings. I have explored every inch of this house, seeking clues to the Wilson vanishment. I have examined the topography of our hill, the famed Hill of Stars, of which the Indians made so much. I have measured the angles of those three standing stones, where Miss Delaney and I enjoyed our tête-à-tête. This I have performed, attempting to relate observable facts to the many stories I have collected concerning this location."

"I knew you were holding back," said Theresa. "What have you got?"

"Hints, inferences, possibilities, theories; we begin with those, then advance by degrees." Vorchek paused to savor the dark red wine on his tongue, swallowed, went on. "My anecdotal data—all I have for the moment—consists of three elements: the legends of the Indians; a letter composed by Rhonda Wilson, wife of James, shortly before she went missing; and the more recent tales derived from statements made by subsequent tenants of this house.

"My students! Your lesson for the day: the wisdom of the red man. The Yavapai relate stories, descended to them from the long lost Yotapai, of the Hill of Stars. My primary informant is one Tonipah, a wizened old tribal elder whom I first met many years ago in connection with another peculiar case. In his day the man proved a gold mine of information. Listen to what he told me.

"When Tonipah speaks of the Hill of Stars, he has nothing to say about star-gazing, nor any conventional astronomical lore. Quite the contrary, for him the hill is a mystic place, where his forbears, or even earlier peoples, once congregated in order to commune with the gods. It is a key tenet of Southwestern aboriginal religions that certain narrowly circumscribed geographical locales constitute special zones of power, where the rules of nature alter, shift, transform. The kookery of the New Age movement has latched onto this belief, with its prattle about the 'vortex' or 'vortices' where the true believer may obtain 'oneness' with majestic cosmic forces. As those types practice it, the belief is a simple-minded corruption of genuine Indian theology. The Yotapai held that the vortices (we may as well term them thusly) mark intrusions into our space or dimension from spaces and dimensions beyond the material universe. It is within those mysterious, forbidden realms that the gods dwell—definite beings of some sort, known only through the effects of their power—awesome entities who are the actual controllers of the universe, the faces of the forces of nature, if you will.

Tonipah has explained to me that these gods determine all eventualities, past and future, for good or ill, according to their own dictates, of which man may only postulate.

“Great and terrible beings they are, lofty, impossibly distant in a fashion superseding mere mileage or light-years, yet they may be approached, for they are wont, at times, to intervene directly in natural affairs, and they are prone to do so at these vortices, gateways from their realm to ours. The man who positions himself at the right time and place may greet them as they emerge. The Indians believed, furthermore, that one could call to them through a vortex, and if the gods deigned, they would come. That was not always, I gather, a happy experience for the supplicant. The gods, Tonipah assures me, are beholden to no man, nor do they always take kindly to being disturbed, or having their sacred places profaned.

“Tonipah emphasizes the danger, often extreme, of the vortices. He recounts cherished hero-myths of mighty warriors who dared gaze upon the gods, dared treat with them or demand of them, actually dared return with them to their celestial homes. One such fabulous story is set at this very Hill of Stars, which, by the way, is a crude translation of the Yavapai phrase ‘Negozah-to-Vangah’, meaning ‘Mound of the Burning Lights’. Oh yes, I derive from my sources the claim that the hill is an artificial structure, erected by the early pueblo builders to enable them to more readily reach a vortex that hovered somewhat above the natural terrain. That would have been a major engineering feat for barbaric tribesmen.

“But about this wonderful hero, this Vezimoox, who out of pride would seek the gods and wring from them his desire. He is a stock figure of legend, battling savage animals, crushing and enslaving tribal enemies, trekking to far lands in search of noble adventure; the standard catalogue of glorious enterprises, until he sought the gods, that is. Suddenly the tale turns morbid. We are told that he journeyed to the Hill of Stars, contrived to open the gate, passed through into strange outer spheres, came back—after many years, a long generation—changed in body and mind, broken, scarcely human, less or more so depending on the archetypal variation. Some of his tribe shunned him, fled screaming from him; others worshiped him as a demi-god; the elders, after long consultation in ‘medicine’ or magic council, ordered what he had become incinerated in a great bonfire. One variant claims that the gods destroyed him, that his soul would not find repose in proper burial. Whichever version we embrace, it is not a wholly

edifying tale.”

Vorchek rose from his seat to knock out his pipe into the dying fire. He turned and said, “As my last word this night, I inform you of my immediate conclusions derived from this day’s observations, as they relate to these stories. I am absolutely convinced that this hill is of artificial construction. I examined the cliffs facing the creek. I discern no natural stratigraphy, rather a fairly homogeneous mass which, allowing for compression through centuries, exhibits the customary signs of fill dirt. Those three standing stones, also, have been emplaced by artifice, an obvious finding, since their mineral material resides not in this hill, but among the bluffs and formations over by Cathedral Rock, miles away. So far, then, my views are in accord with Indian legend. Tomorrow night, lady and gentleman, another lesson. Now I advise sleep.”

Each to his room, each to his sleeping bag, they passed the night, an intensely quiet period, a stillness broken only by occasional stray cries of animals and the souging of wind. Come the morn Vorchek and the girl were chipper enough, Ronny considerably less so, he not being accustomed to early hours, which he normally filled with sound and fury. “I felt weird without my earphones,” he grouched at breakfast; cold cereal and orange juice.

“Tomorrow I’ll fry bacon and eggs,” Theresa promised.

“Toward which,” boomed the professor, “we will avidly look forward. A big day awaits. Mr. Gale, you will supply water for our washing and drinking, one item on a short list of chores, and later in the afternoon I will grace you with a perusal of my notes, thus stimulating your education. Miss Delaney, this morning I must activate my instruments, a task for which your aid will be invaluable.”

Theresa smiled, glanced at the scowling Ronny. “Sounds great, Professor.”

The machinery of Professor Vorchek requires description. On this expedition he employed three mechanisms of unusual make. The first, sized and shaped like a metal shoe box, resembled a conventional handheld Geiger counter, “Which in essence it is,” he told his assistant, although it possessed too many dials and sprouted from its top surface something like a miniature Victrola horn. The second was a small cubic device with numerous mesh-covered orifices, tiny needles of antennae, and a single switch, all of which swiveled smoothly on a tall, spidery tripod, the superstructure being attached via tangled filaments of dangling wiring to a bulky battery box. The third device, from a

remove, might be likened to a large, awkward keyboard, or an antique Moog synthesizer, but viewed closely one would see an array of meters, knobs, and buttons. The various dials, meters, and switches of these machines were annotated in a manner that guaranteed incomprehensibility to all but the initiated.

Taking them in order, Vorchek ponderously lectured Theresa, saying (in part, with much brain-stunning technicality omitted), "This device, a simple alteration of mine, picks up ethereal radiations of force not otherwise detectable by normal means. Its range is minuscule, so it must be portable, yet powerful enough to locate spot sources of uncanny influence. That justifies the cumbersome, wide-mouthed receiver. The next item detects similar emissions, but functions as a range-finder and directionality indicator, identifying, if it operates correctly, waves or beams of force coming at us. It may prove useful, if my hypotheses approximate accuracy. This final instrument, designed by me from scratch, is my magnum opus. If we detect curious energy frequencies emanating from this vicinity, the machine should allow me to boost and modulate the force, thus rendering it possible to capture or manipulate the unknown. More than anything, I wish to put this one to the test. Incredible mysteries may be revealed!"

Some time later Ronny, drenched in sweat from the climbing temperature and his unwelcome labor, took a break and hailed Vorchek, who sat alone on the porch scribbling in a small black notebook. The youth collapsed heavily beside the older man, queried indifferently as what he was doing, shrugged at the response. Then he broached another, apparently more interesting topic. Inclining his head to Vorchek's, Ronny said, "That Theresa's a real looker. I mean, she's all right. I could go a few rounds with her. You know, I think she's got the hots for me, too. What is she to you, anyway? Just another student, right?"

The professor replied frostily, without looking up, "Miss Delaney's official position, I suppose, is my private secretary."

"Oh, yeah?" Ronny said with a leer. "How private?"

Vorchek now turned hard eyes to the boy, said crushingly, "Very private."

Ronny shrugged again, shortly pulled himself wearily upright and pleaded the necessity of finishing his chores.

He stuck to those, and others laid upon him, throughout the day, accomplishing all, though his efforts were increasingly interspersed with comments which Vorchek considered to border on the mutinous. For

Theresa it was a day of mounting lassitude, verging on boredom once her minimal duties to her mentor were finished. Only the professor continued easily and happily, ever writing his notes about the nothing going on. This pattern held firm until after the evening dinner, packaged dried stuff which the girl boiled in the skillet.

Afterward the young people found Vorchek on the back porch, just outside the door, standing with his portable detector in hand at the edge of the cliff. The sluggish creek below glistened in the light of the gibbous moon. Somewhere in the darkling brush one quail called to another, anonymous insects chirped and buzzed. A different type of sound, a metallic hum, complemented the whispers of nature. Theresa, attempting to evade her eager admirer, struck up a conversation, idly asking the professor of his results.

Expecting nothing, she was surprised to hear him reply, "Yes, my dear, we advance, by the first infinitesimal degrees. I have achieved a reading. Listen." Vorchek swung the detector in an arc, generating a louder burst of clicking static. "Yesterday, at this same spot, I derived nothing. Now, the issuance of force, weakly so—very small scale, non-directional, scarcely present—yet unmistakable. It is there. Something develops. I think the pattern begins."

"What pattern is that?" Ronny asked dubiously.

"Come inside, both of you, and over our wine I will offer you, free of charge, another lesson."

When they were situated and refreshed with drink Vorchek said, "I present the second datum point, the letter of Mrs. Wilson to her sister, in which she outlines her observations on the strangeness of her household mere weeks before the world forever lost track of her. There had been previous occurrences of which we have no record, probably written down in correspondence now lost. What survives is surely indicative. I hold in my hand the letter, acquired from descendants. Before I analyze, I shall read the relevant portions. Attend, my friends, to the statement of Rhonda Wilson:

*"Something in this new home of ours continues to distress me. Yes, Josie, it's happened again. This time it wasn't in the house, thank goodness, but outside, by those three big rocks where the children play. Jimmy went out there after supper, when it had cooled off a bit, to get on with clearing away some of the smaller stones. We could make a mountain out of those! Well, the kids were there before him, inside the circle, and as he came near he overheard Bobby speaking, then Sally, only it didn't sound like they were talking to each other, but to*



*someone else. Jimmy charged in among the rocks, wanting to see who was there, but it was only the kids. However, right when he arrived he thought he heard another voice, or some kind of sound anyway, which he first thought was speech, but wasn't certain after. Whatever he heard wasn't English, that he told me definite. It makes me think of the Indians, who might still hang around now and then, but Jimmy says it wasn't anyone. He asked the children what they were doing, they said, "Talking to the rocks." My husband picked on them for that, suggested they might find better things to do, Bobby sulked, but Sally said, "They talk to us." Jimmy said they didn't, threatened to swat her, Bobby blurted, "They do. They want us to go places with them," and Sally clapped her hands and said, "It sounds like fun. Can we?" Jimmy hustled them inside to listen to the radio. He doesn't know what to think. It's hard to keep children amused out here. Radio reception is terrible. I guess the Apaches put ideas in their heads. But remember what I wrote you last time. That happened to me, unless I dreamed it. Nobody put that idea in my head. I still haven't told Jimmy. Maybe I should, before something really odd happens.'*

"There you have it," said Vorchek. "There is more, nothing of interest to us. I formulate ideas from this. What say you?"

"It's a joke," sniffed Ronny. "This old lady, this Rhonda, is pulling her sister's leg. She got the idea from living in a creepy old house, pretended it was haunted to liven up her dull life here. That's the answer."

"It's a stupid one," sneered Theresa. "You got everything wrong, bucko. Professor, you've already told us better than that. Rhonda wasn't old when she wrote that letter, neither was the house. It was brand spanking new."

"It looks old and creepy to me," Ronny muttered.

Said Vorchek, "Please, Mr. Gale, adhere to data. The Wilson House did not possess an evil reputation yet; indeed, it bore no tradition of character at all, its mortar being scarcely dry. One may, I suppose, speculate as to the information the Wilsons received from the Indian construction crew, and the extent to which those stories were heeded."

"Which should be," Theresa said decisively, "just about not at all. As a matter of logic—right, Professor?—whatever legends about the hill the Wilsons picked up on, they laughed at. There's no way they took that stuff seriously."

"Wise of them," Ronny snapped. "It is nuts. I say it was a joke."

"I am inclined," said Vorchek, "to dismiss the mirth hypothesis. Mrs. Wilson has a tale to tell, more than one, apparently, and she reports on the situation as she understands it. Thus I see it. Peering back into that time, the question is: what really was happening?"

Theresa cried brightly, "Maybe it was an Indian trick. They knew the old stories. Maybe they were teasing the children, playing games with them."

"I'll buy that," said Ronny. "There you have it, all wrapped in ribbons, we can go home."

Vorchek politely demurred. To Ronny he said, "We have not yet begun. There is work to do. To you, Miss Delaney, I say, based on my information, that the Apaches returned to their homes, mostly quite some distance from here, once construction was complete, nor do they subsequently appear in the records of the house. They were not sneaking about firing arrows at passersby. This was the 1940s, not the Wild West. All evidence speaks to the extreme isolation of the locale at the time. There were no visitors, invited or otherwise; none human, at any rate.

"I desire from you both that you strive to, as it were, connect the dots. You now have two pieces of historical data. Also, forget not that my detector has begun to read something. I deduced that finding before it occurred. Fit together the pieces of the puzzle in your own minds."

A night of unquiet and disturbed rest followed. Professor Vorchek and Theresa bedded down early, Ronny attempting to maintain his normal schedule, a failed effort given the lack of his customary noisy pursuits. His light went out. Perhaps an hour later, or a little more—sometime before midnight, at least—something happened. The trio were individually awakened by sounds of unusual activity.

Probably Theresa's keen ears heard it first, then Ronny's, the professor's mature faculties requiring more stimuli. The girl awoke to the sound of heavy feet pounding downstairs. That someone was up and angry was her initial impression. When the loud steps mounted the stairs and passed into the hall she rose, felt her way to the door of her room in the dark, called out. No reply issued from beyond, but the steps approached, paused outside her door. She imagined she heard a peculiar, guttural voice speak her name. Theresa's impulse to throw open the door and complain died in her throat. Suddenly she knew that no one familiar to her stood without. She held her breath, listening intently.

The steps moved on. She heard the sound of a door hastily opened,

observed faint light filtering from the hall, more steps, a frenzied rapping at her door. She drew back, until she heard a welcome voice whispering, "Miss Delaney, it is gone. Open, please."

Only Vorchek would have hesitated, under the circumstances, at a young woman's unlocked door. At her bidding he entered, carrying in one hand a lantern, in the other his compact detector. "The force mounts," he announced. "During the visitation it increased markedly. Now it fades to the earlier level. Did you see anything?"

"I certainly did not," Theresa hissed. "What was it?"

"Ask me that in a week."

Came more noise from down the hall. Ronny blundered in, drawn by the light. "Did you hear it?" he cried. "That was crazy. What's going on?" He looked ashen.

Theresa sniped, "I guess it's a practical joke. Yours, mine, or the professor's?"

Ronny snarled something not quite comprehensible, but obviously vulgar. Vorchek cut in, saying, "I find that sleep eludes me. I am going downstairs for a drink. I beg you both to join me. Given this event, I believe your third lesson comes due ahead of schedule."

"I can not properly explain," he said shortly, between puffs on his pipe and sips of wine, "what just transpired. I mean to do so in time. Suffice to say that it fits the pattern. In the years following the Wilson disappearance others briefly inhabited the house. None stayed long, a few told tales in order to justify their quick evacuations. This is piecemeal, fragmentary information, yet exhibiting a delightful sameness. The tenants disapproved of the dwelling, deplored the curious sound effects, the half-heard hints of strange voices, the sensation of brooding menace. Yes, the trappings associated with hauntings accumulated rapidly, long before the house acquired its current air of hoary seediness. There is more, although I can not confirm the report. According to one, very second hand, source, there was a fellow, a squatter who moved in about fifteen years ago, who may have experienced more. This Mr. Olney, a counter-culture type, set up an impromptu household here, hoping to commune with the cosmos, attain oneness, the typical sort of thing that draws many to this region. His intimates assure me that he dropped out of sight after a few weeks, never to present himself again before the world. No one has seen him since. His last known location: the Wilson House, atop the ancient Hill of Stars."

"Another disappearance," said Theresa. She stubbed out her

cigarette on the floor. After this casual act of vandalism she continued, "This is starting to seem a dangerous spot. I don't know that it's worth it."

Ronny, polishing off the wine bottle, said vehemently, "I say let's get the hell out of here. I can't sleep in this place."

Vorchek laughed, a fey sound redolent of forced ease. "My boy, such worries are needless. The majority of this house's occupants have come and gone unharmed, carrying away with them no more than charming tales of nondescript spookiness. They did not genuinely suffer. We are prepared, forewarned, forearmed. Do not fear. That, most likely, is your only bane. Miss Delaney, you know that I would never place at risk your health, your safety, or your sanity. I guarantee you, my dear, against all eventualities. I am here to learn, not to lend my name to another mysterious anecdote."

"But you'll push it to the limit," she chided. "I've seen you in action. It's clear that something mysterious lurks here. That's no tall tale. What can we learn here? What, that is, besides verification of the haunting?"

"'Haunting' is such an obscure word," replied Vorchek. "It means little, without a solid substratum of data. That I shall compile. When you and I leave here, Miss Delaney, we may know what happens here, how it happens, why it happens. That is far more, you must admit, than we currently glean from these odd items of history."

Theresa acquiesced, as always. Ronny argued the point, subsiding only when the girl proffered a cutting allusion to cowardice. The young man was forced to grant that nothing painful or overtly threatening had occurred. Why not ride out the situation, maybe come away with boasts of his involvement in a daring scientific enterprise? In one fashion or another his companions brought him into line.

Rest was out of the question. The young people whiled away the hours until dawn, while Vorchek kept busy stalking the halls of the house with his portable device. In the morning they ate cold cereal with the last of the milk. "We'll need to make a run into town," said Theresa, "for more milk, or we eat this dry."

"I'll go," Ronny offered.

"Miss Delaney will do the honors," stated Vorchek. "Mr. Gale, you and I will be busy. My dear, here are the keys to my van. Forget not the wine. I appreciate that touch of civilizing influence more than I predicted. Purchase adequately, and attend to quality. Never should we slum through these doings. Be careful crossing the creek."

Theresa had not thought of that obstacle, which she instantly dreaded. Regardless, she set out, did make her way across without incident, spun into Sedona for a refreshing two hours of shopping. She returned by midmorning laden with goods, bounced through the stream once more, found Ronny angrily chopping wood ("Your old pal thinks we need a fire every night!"), the professor engaged in his favored activities. He reported cheerfully, detector in hand.

"The emanations continue," he said, "and they intensify. Apparently our presence acts as a catalyst. That makes sense, of a sort, for we deal not with natural radiation, but with directed force, an awareness which reacts to us. I would have thought so. The force rises and falls in spots, spiking in the terrain about the standing stones. Do you not recognize, dear girl, the establishment of that location as a focus, a vortex of energy? It must be. Add that to our knowledge of Mrs. Wilson's letter, deduce freely, and you will close with the truth, I say. It is near time to fire up the larger instrument, the direction finder, discern the topography of the powers surrounding us."

Theresa shrugged and "guessed so" aloud. Vorchek shortly became so rapt with his clicking and whining toys that he forgot about her, despite the fact that she produced from her purchased wares a block of imported havarti cheese, his favorite. She eventually wandered to Ronny, eager to tease him for his perspiration-inducing contributions to the expedition.

Surly described his mood. "I was stupid to come," he ranted, swinging the ax with venomous strokes, "stupid to stay. Your sweetheart has no use for me, except to step and fetch it. What am I doing here, besides carrying water and cleaning the portable toilet? He bent over backwards talking me into this, promised me the moon."

"Perhaps he desires to improve your mind," Theresa quipped, "a monumental task to be sure. Even the professor isn't that good." Ronny responded so nastily that she walked quickly away. She spent the period prior to lunch reorganizing the kitchen, hatching schemes for a nice meal. This she concocted, a goulash that brought all together with some show of civility.

Vorchek lectured as he ate. "More patterns, more data, formless yet, but coalescing, I think. Wise it was to come fully equipped. The portable detector merely notes the effect. The directional unit, on the other hand, grants me delicious clarity. By the way, an excellent repast, my dear, one that I relish. My life and work would be so drab and spartan without you. Well, the source of the emanations is definitely

the standing stones. The field contaminates much else, including the physical structure of the house, saturates odd points of the hilltop, but it radiates like a bright beacon from within those stones. That is a great find. We know now where to focus our research. The Wilson House, in the main, is irrelevant. It was unfortunately located, no more than that. I find no mystery in its framework."

"What was that thing last night?" Ronny demanded.

Said Vorchek, "I can not reason to an answer at present. I must first explore the variables. Something manifested; that manifestation assumed a strong aural form, if nothing else. We saw nothing, must not assume physicality until the evidence requires. Give me time. This day will provide largesse. I feel it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," fumed Ronny.

Theresa said quietly, "Ghosts, I bet."

Vorchek grinned. "I will take that bet, Miss Delaney. Claims of ghosts—the basis of haunting tales—usually involve so much more or less than people realize. In this case, I believe we have grasped onto a lot more."

After lunch Professor Vorchek hauled out his third machine, which he designated the "modulator", dragging it on its wheeled metal carriage over the porch, where the range finder was set up, to a position halfway between the house and the three weird stones. He sat himself on a folding metal stool, attached cables to the boxed battery at his feet (one big enough for an automobile), connected more cords and wires, slung off his hat into the dust and clapped cabled earphones to his head. Then he began to play the instrument, appearing from a distance like a notable pianist in concert.

His companions observed him at whiles, chose not to interfere or be drawn in to his obscure labors. Round about three o'clock Theresa, studying him more intently, noted his lack of motion, his blank, staring expression, accosted him. Vorchek started as if from a dream, beheld her with puzzlement in his eyes.

Said he, "One never knows, until the testing, what results will be gained. I have spent these hours deciphering the frequencies of the stones. What did I expect? I was operating on hunches. There were so many possibilities, all lacking probability. I have my result, or the initial one. I do not know what it means."

"What have you got?"

"An optical illusion, my dear, unless you verify it for me. I have boosted the radiation levels, concentrated them into a tighter beam,

thinking to crack open an unseen door. I believe I have done that. Look straight ahead, Miss Delaney, at the stones, and observe with all of your attention. What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"That, of course, is a false statement. You see something, though perhaps not what I see. Decades of training have attuned my mind to such phenomena. It would be a pity if my current vision is constrained within the parameters of the psychological. Here: I turn up the modulator another notch; now, you take my place. The phones are unnecessary. Look there, clear your mind, and focus."

The girl obeyed wondering, wholly unsure of herself. What she saw were the tall red stones, upended and tapered like claws scraping at the blue sky, with the folds of rolling dull brown hills perceived beyond them. At first she peered this way and that, endeavoring to pick out the unique element that fascinated her mentor, but he cautioned her, repeating his strictures, so she banished thought and doubt, gazed upon the scene as upon a formless screen, stared unblinking, and—this was marvelous!—she indeed saw something other. The recognizable view wavered, a soft strobing effect, to be replaced by degrees with another scene. Her straining vision encompassed an alien landscape, a barren region of tumbled, broken gray boulders or blocks, with mighty stone spires and crags of jet black soaring beyond into a dim yellow sky. A fuzzy greenish orb lowered from between two jagged peaks, a form scarce brighter than that sky, yet difficult to look at long, painful to the eye. At last Theresa blinked, but the vision, though it flickered darkly, remained.

She exclaimed, "What is it, Professor? Where is it? How can I be seeing this?"

A heady laugh erupted from Vorchek. "You do perceive." He hugged her shoulders. "Theresa, child, you never let me down. I doubt that just anyone could surmount the perceptual barriers. I have opened the door. This vortex, to employ the common terminology, is a gate, normally opened only from the other side. I have broken the rules. Quite naughty of me, I suppose, yet undeniably thrilling.

"You are looking into another dimension, into a realm which does not correspond to our immediate geography. I consider it unlikely that it relates to any place on earth, question its connection to the known universe. I could toss you hypotheses concerning wormholes in space leading to odd planets in far galaxies, but a little birdie in my mind tells me that is much too conventional a conclusion. The vortex, I deduce,

spans not distance, however incalculable, but entire planes of existence. You peer into another universe, or something higher than a universe, a domain of complete otherness."

Theresa dropped her eyes, shook her head. When she raised her eyes to Vorchek she stared strangely, glanced about in mild distress. "It's like looking into the sun," she said. "It's hard to see regular stuff."

Said the professor, "You will snap back within seconds. That land possesses peculiar visual qualities, or the medium of transmission does so. One requires adjustment."

Theresa said, "Okay, I'm all right now. Professor, it looks like a dead land, but things happen around here. We were visited last night. How do you put the pieces together?"

"Appearances deceive. Through that mystic tunnel there pass appurtenances of Mind. Remember, we see a tiny fraction of totality. Who knows what treasures of life and being thrive beyond the gate." Vorchek turned at a sound. "Ronny, my lad, come over here and join us. You may finish fetching the water shortly. We perform an experiment that demands your studious input."

Ronny warily came, asking, "What is it now?" Vorchek directed him as he had directed the girl, only in this case, despite lengthy trials, without result.

The professor chortled, "What did I say? Not all are vouchsafed that sublime experience."

Ronny huffed, "I don't get it."

Replied Vorchek, "You will, my boy, you will. I harbor enormously high hopes for you. Your presence may well prove the deciding factor in my success." The young man started to sputter a response, which Vorchek heeded not for a moment, instead shooing away his companions that he might dive into a furious round of note-writing. He tacitly left to Theresa the onerous task of explaining the meaning of what had transpired, a task for which, despite all her long training at the professor's feet, she was remarkably unqualified. Ronny, having half-heartedly attended to her account, proclaimed it all "hooey", in the process employing a more objectionable term.

Later Vorchek insisted on a fancy dinner, urging all to pitch into the effort of preparation. This Theresa appreciated, marveling that the staid professor should stoop to matters less than ethereal, but then Vorchek was in a gay mood of unbounded ebullience, almost frighteningly cheerful and eager to please and promote an air of festivity. "It has been a great day," he explained when pressed, "and I expect further



greatness in the offing. We stand on the brink.” He had brought the modulator back into the house, but he kept it running, breaking at times from culinary duties to check its settings and examine the meters.

During the meal of grilled pork chops, potatoes roasted in foil, green beans from a can and packaged dinner rolls, Vorchek, dropping all restraint, kept up a stream of shop-talk, discoursing on “channeled energy flows,” “bodiless sense impressions,” the possibilities of what he (even for him) murkily termed “intrusive reversal.” He ate with gusto, gesturing between bites as he made points largely to himself. Theresa grinned at his antics, the more so when she failed to understand him, which was often. Ronny rolled his eyes and wryly grimaced at the girl, but she refused to rise to his bait.

Daylight dimmed and faded away during this dinner. With the gathering gloom, defiantly held back by the lighting of lamps, a more somber tone invaded the bleak living room where they were sequestered. Conversation, even casual chatter, muted and died. Each occupant of the room seemed inwardly drawn, wreathed in his own brand of thought. Theresa appeared bored, Ronny frustrated, the professor—well, difficult to read he might be, but attentive would do—his posture, the hunch of his shoulders, the tilt of his large head, the mannered stroking of his manicured beard, suggested listening.

To the latter amazement of the others present, Ronny heard it first. “There’s something outside,” he said, “something whistling.”

Vorchek said, “Cicadas, as may be. Miss Delaney, is this the season?”

“How should I know?” she snapped. “I don’t hear... wait, there is something.”

Ronny pushed away from the table, muttering, “I said so, didn’t I?”

“I hear it now,” agreed Vorchek. “A thin whine, very low. Are the windows shut?” Theresa informed him that she had opened them for air. The professor rose, pulled closed the grating panes. “I still hear it,” he said, “getting louder. Folks, brace yourselves for wild times. A visitor comes, and my modulator is operating at full blast.”

Ronny’s frantic query was stifled by the roar of noise that suddenly ensued, a sound as of great force vigorously applied to the walls of the house. A disagreeable sensation of extreme pressure beat down upon the three, rendering them airless and gasping. Now it was as if sonic booms shook the earth, like the sounds of the previous night, yet ferociously greater in magnitude. This was not an unseen entity stamping through a corridor, but rather a behemoth pounding on the

house’s shell of stone, thrusting itself against the stout door and the thin glass of the windows. In no direction could structural deterioration be seen, but it felt as if the house, and its tenants, were being crushed.

The background whine escalated to an ear-splitting shriek, mingling with Theresa’s scream and Ronny’s hapless bellow of fear. Professor Vorchek dashed to his modulator, set up in a corner of the room, twirled knobs and pressed buttons. Over the din he cried out once, “I am trying to understand! Our minds are too hardened with age. Speak plainly, to the impulses of our brains, or heed the machine, which I have readied for you.” The agonizing sound mounted further, attained a devastating crescendo, then ceased in an instant. With that, no trace of the baleful effects remained.

Ronny waved his fingers in the air over his head, a spastic motion, cried, “I’m out of here!”

Vorchek strode forth, gripped him savagely, hissed, “Are you insane? That thing waits outside, in the dark, primed to pounce on anybody foolish enough to confront it. If that must be, let us choose the time and place.”

Ronny slumped into his chair, babbling, “This can’t be for real. You two set this up for me, to make me out an idiot. You both look down on me, treat me like trash.” So he said, but said no more of departing.

“It is over,” said Vorchek. “The manifestation subsides, as they always do. We are hail and hearty, without cause for fear. I counsel deep sleep, and no dreams.”

“That’s a laugh,” said Theresa. “Surely, Professor, this means trouble. That thing wants to eat us, or whatever. Did your machine draw it to us?”

Vorchek appeared nonplussed. “Too many variables,” he absently replied. “Answers will require months of analysis. The modulator may be a factor. Bear in mind, however, that strange things occurred here long before I activated the device.”

“And what was that you were carrying on about,” Ronny demanded, “while all that was happening? Who were you talking to?”

“I do not know,” Vorchek said pensively, “that I spoke with anyone. I, too, am capable of guesses. I refuse to act on them, however, without appropriate evidence. No more. I tire. To bed I go. My friends, suit yourselves.”

Eventually the young people, out of sheer ennui, went their separate ways, but Theresa did not sleep. She sat brooding in her room for a lengthy passage, her mind working, until she could stand it no

more, went forth to speak with Vorchek. Light gleamed under his door. She knocked, he admitted her, asserting that he was just that minute bedding down. He was still dressed, though, wearing his reading glasses, and he had a batch of notes and electrical gear laid out on the tiny table he used for a desk.

"More happened tonight," Theresa said, "than you let on. You weren't speaking to Ronny or myself there at the end. And what's all this? What are you up to now?"

Vorchek hesitated, shrugged, told her, "That's my old fashioned tape recorder. I am transferring digital recordings of those odd sounds to this, where I may control speed and pitch."

"What's the point of that?"

"To better understand what was being said."

Theresa caught her breath. "That's a mighty big deduction," said she. "It sounded like angry bees to me."

"It did not sound like that," the professor pointed out, "to the Wilson children. They heard speech, something that made sense to them. Their juvenile ears were tuned to extremely high frequencies. Mine are not, nor are yours and Ronny's. I believe you two barely miss the threshold. With my apparatus I can tinker with the frequencies, reduce them to a level my aging ears can grasp. I have been attempting to accomplish that."

"Why would anyone—" Theresa paused, "—anyone on the other side, want to speak with us?"

"Do not ask me. I would gladly speak with them, because I wish to learn. That may justify their actions, or not. What could they learn from us? Perhaps they want something."

"What?"

"Us." Vorchek sighed, removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes. "The Wilsons are gone. We can not account for the whereabouts of other specimens of humanity who have ventured here. There are ancient legends. My imagination is rich. In the absence of hard data, I may conceive anything."

"How do you collect that data?"

Vorchek chuckled, an easy, disarming sound, patted her cheek, as a devoted uncle would his favorite niece. "I suppose I do not. How do I begin? Some mysteries, unfortunately, must remain forever beyond me. Now to bed, little girl, before I call in the riot squad."

If Theresa slept, she did so without enthusiasm. Sometime later still she jolted awake, her nerves tingling, springing to her feet in darkness

before she asked herself the meaning of her actions. She listened, heard, wondered. There was movement in the house. Her first thought—an icy spike of fear!—was of another horrid visitation. Fervent attentiveness indicated another answer. The movement was next door, in the room to her right. A door opened over there, followed by furtive steps in the hall. Professor Vorchek was up and about. The steps creaked away along the hall, down the stairs. Shortly the girl barely discerned the groan of the front door.

Curiosity and dread assailed her. The former won. In her filmy nightie she slipped out of her room, pausing only to apply slippers to her tender feet, and crept across the chill hall into an unused room that faced the open expanse of the weedy front yard. Through the cool pane of the window she peered. Down there, by the light of the moon, Vorchek occupied himself with emplacing his modulator in its previous position. When that was done, and he had manipulated its many controls, he advanced slowly toward the three standing stones that loomed in the murk like giant, cowed Druid priests.

The professor stood before the stones. Slight motions indicated speech on his part, a desire to be noticed, although he stood entirely alone. After a minute he proceeded within the confines of the stones, partly vanishing into shadows the moon could not dispel.

Now Theresa saw something weird. She wondered if it were a trick of the eye. A second thought indicated to her the occurrence of another vision similar to that she and the professor had experienced, only with different effects. Peering into the space between the stones, where Vorchek had gone, she beheld a skyscape of stars, an awesome panorama of brilliant, densely crowded motes. Through a telescope such a sight might be realized, but here she received it unaided. Cosmic wonders flashed and twinkled where they should not be.

What the professor said she could not hear, but a rumbling noise responded, seeming to burst forth when he paused in speech. The sounds were wholly alien, yet there was that in their timbre and cadence which suggested intelligent communication. If that were a voice, it was no kind that she had ever heard or wished to hear. Indeed, it so pained her ears that she clapped her palms to them to shut out the dreadful impact on her ear drums, a defensive action of no consequence. Still the harsh aural bombardment rattled her brain.

Ultimately Theresa realized that the voice had stopped, that the strange tapestry of stars had vanished, revealing the dim hilly terrain beyond the stones, and that Professor Vorchek had returned to his

instrument, which he was packing up. When he strode for the front door she left the window and dashed back into her room, shutting the door and waiting breathlessly. She heard him presently ascend the stairs, return to his own room. Occasional, trivial sounds were soon replaced by silence. The odd episode had concluded.

That morning Vorchek slept late. Theresa came down early, having fitfully slumbered, and ate a dish of bacon and biscuits alone. Through the kitchen window overlooking the creekside cliffs she recognized another sunny, warming day, ever the norm for this season, in the offing.

Ronny appeared, looking scruffier than ever, his hair tangled and backward cap askew. He said of a sudden, "I'm all for getting out of here today. I can't take this any more. Whatever we're supposed to learn, it isn't worth it, not to me. I couldn't care less. None of this interests me, none of this matters to my life. I signed up for Vorchek's class because I needed three credits, not because I want to risk my neck chasing wacky mysteries. I thought it was nonsense, laughed with my buddies behind his back. Okay, I was wrong. This joint is dangerous. I'm going to insist that he take me out of here, get me back to the sane world. If he won't, I'll hike out. Five lousy miles will take me to safety. With luck I'll never even hear about the Wilson House or Hill of Stars again." Theresa replied somewhat, saw no point in arguing with him if he lacked enthusiasm to that degree. She had not wanted him there in the first place.

Ronny skipped breakfast, went back to his room, saying he intended to pack. While Theresa scoured her dishes she overheard a muffled but heated exchange overhead. Shortly steps descended the stairs, evolved into Vorchek briskly entering the kitchen. Fully attired and looking ready for action, he clapped his hands and with cheery countenance said, "Miss Delaney, I discover that our medical supplies run low. I snagged my finger, yet I have no bandage. We must supplement our stash." Theresa offered to attend to his wounded digit, but he waved her off, refusing even to show her the cut. "It is minor," he said, "but it reminds me we should be prepared. You must go into town again in order to stock up."

Theresa frowned, responding with puzzlement, "I packed a ton of that stuff, hydrogen peroxide, rubbing alcohol, and a big box of bandages and gauze. It's in the store room."

"A mistake on my part," said Vorchek, "led to a little accident; water damage, you see. The bandages are soggy. Take the van—you

will have no trouble—and get what we need, as well as anything else you can think of purchasing. Take care of it at once, and fear not. I have no activities planned for this morning."

She agreed. Vorchek nodded excitedly, stalked from the room. Within a few minutes Theresa had pulled herself together and was once more braving the tricky creek crossing and the long dusty drive back to firm pavement. Given all that had happened, all that she had heard, it did her good to get away, to be out and about with normal people in normal situations. That strange outpost in the wilderness felt so far away, so meaningless. After buying the requested wares at a grocery store she spent another couple of hours touring the marvelous shops of Sedona. She bought herself a wind chime, a hand-made trinket of burnished copper and prettily colored glass, as a memento. She did not see the Wilson House again until that afternoon. As it turned out, it would be her last sight of that disturbing locale.

With a distant glimpse of the state park's visitor center behind her, she and the van jostled along the forlorn dirt road toward the creek when she began to perceive something unusual happening. Bright sun, steady, relentless, vivid blue sky bereft of clouds or haze—every vista crisp, harshly defined—and yet the scene before her appeared disconnected from all around it. Beyond the creek she strained with narrowed eyes to see the infamous hill with its lonely house atop, experiencing difficulties in this mundane task. A shadow, of the sort overlaid by a heavy, dense black cloud, hovered there upon the land, without any cloud as cause. She stopped in the rutted lane at the gravelly bank. Yet, the hill was over there, and the house, but she viewed them through a mirage of smoked glass, the scene resembling a still, bleakly painted landscape. Her nerves strummed discordantly. Fear? No, not yet at any rate; a humming, a virtually subliminal vibration, tugged at her psyche. What did it mean?

She crossed the muddy waters, the four-wheeled drive scampering up the far side, drove around and up the hill. The hideously artificial gloom intensified, as did the tormenting vibration. Like an angry hive of bees it sounded, bees trying to speak, to make themselves heard and understood, a senseless sound redolent with unwelcome significance. She pulled onto the little mesa at the summit, drew up before the front of the house. No living thing was in sight. The professor's modulator sat on the porch, squatting on its stand, red lights winking. From the three standing stones to her left, wreathed in deeper darkness, a stream of green stars shot like meteors into the encompassing blackness.

Theresa forced herself out of the van, stood with her hand clenched to the driver's side door. She was scared now, terrified, knowing that something had gone horribly wrong, dreading the revelation, sick with horror at her own presence there. Emotion urged her to flee, mind counseled investigation. Her companions were thereabout, unseen.

A soul-chilling scream rent the air. She recognized in a flash Ronny's voice, agonizingly distorted though it was. She could not locate the source. It came from everywhere. It came again, more ghastly still. The cries came—the realization hit like a sledge hammer—from the unhallowed standing stones, from which the green lights gushed. Ronny was in there!

She stepped toward the red rocks with the jerking motions of an automaton, calling out, "Ronny, can you hear me? It's Theresa. What are you doing in there? For God's sake, get out!" Amidst the glare of hurtling orbs she saw faintly swirling hints of form, movement of shadowy shapes, writhing travesties of fleeting solidity. She did not relish what she saw of them. Theresa screamed.

Ronny shouted hoarsely, his voice emerging as from an echoing tunnel of impossible length, "He did this to me, he set it up. It was planned from the start, all of it. He knew, lured me in! Now they've got me. Oh God, I don't know where I am. Everything is upside down and crazy—a world of madness!—and I can't get out. They block the way. They're closing in, they're coming for me, and they've told me what they want—over here I understand them—they laugh without mouths, telling me what they'll do, what will become of me! Better to die a thousand times than that!"

Ronny's disembodied voice shrieked wildly, and then silence descended like reverberating thunder. The preternatural gloom and the awful vibrations cleared on the instant, leaving Theresa standing before the rock sentinels blinking against the sunny glare. She turned away, her knees faltering, spied Professor Vorchek on the porch, his index finger on the power button of the modulator. She endeavored to speak, could not frame the words. She would have fallen, but he came to her with gigantic strides, wrapped his big arms around her.

He said, "Mr. Gale is gone. It happened, I believe, as in former cases. It was reckless, magnificent foolishness on his part, a risk that went awry. There is nothing we can do. Now I must get you out of here. Our belongings will keep. I can return for them later. For the nonce, your safety only concerns me."

Vorchek proved as good as his word. Before another minute passed

they were in the van, the professor at the wheel, crossing the creek and racing for healthy, conventional surroundings. Theresa was not fit for human company at that juncture. In Sedona Vorchek purchased refreshment at an upscale sandwich shop, drove his charge to a secluded overlook out on the highway that provided a lovely view of the majestic red formations that dominated that countryside, and there he gently insisted that she eat and restore herself. His aplomb recovered considerably faster.

In time she began to speak, hesitantly blurting questions on an array of apparently interconnected subjects. When she had sufficiently broached her concerns Vorchek smiled grimly and launched his amazing tale of what occurred that day at the Wilson House on the Hill of Stars. He said:

"I was close, so close, to grasping the key that unlocks the ultimate gate. Communication through the vortex was at hand! Who knows what worlds or universes lie beyond, who knows who or what lurks there, what entities operate across the gulf for purposes of their own? I imagined myself peeling the film off of the first, modest mysteries. What I would have done, what I could have achieved, I can not say. The perils were so profound and so obvious to me, that I tarried, scarcely daring to proceed. Remember, little girl, that all those who have, unwittingly or otherwise, trafficked across that barrier have come to bad ends, suffering fates we can hardly fathom; nor would we wish to do so, if we could.

"It is partly my fault. I must accept a modicum of blame! I communicated my concerns to Mr. Gale, explained why I held back from the critical step. To enter blindly into that hyper-cosmic region, I told him, to meet face to face its denizens, be they gods or devils: such was madness, I said. I opined that age and worry tamed my ardor, fettered my resolve.

"Mr. Gale laughed at my fears, which he openly deemed cowardice. Truly, Miss Delaney, we greatly underestimated that fine young man. I did not credit as I should his extreme dedication to this project, his hearty eagerness to further my project and the cause of science. His devotion to knowledge was such that he demanded immediate action, that we inaugurate contact across the spheres without delay. Against my better judgment, yet with similar eagerness, I activated my machine, opened again that invisible door.

"I desired speech with those others, those who dwell in that infernal realm beyond the ancient stones. No more did I ask. The front porch



was close enough for me. Mr. Gale, however, could not resist the unholy temptation of that grand moment. So soon as I announced the opening, he sprang unbidden with a shout of youthful triumph—‘Leave this to me, Professor!’ he cried—lunged forward between the stones. That required incredible bravery on his part. The optical effects of the entrance... well, I believe you saw some of that. The titanic weirdness cast a spell over him, drove him on to new heights of devoted heroism. He entered that mystic land, where he was greeted by the inhabitants, and then followed the final horror.

“For our own sakes, we must concoct a tale to account for his disappearance, one that will turn the authorities from us. What may we convincingly report? It is pointless to inquire of his fate. We may never know. Perhaps in time he may return, although that may not be the happiest outcome. Perhaps in a hundred years those who come after us shall delve deeper into these secrets, reveal the unutterable truth. For us it is to push back ignorance by degrees, to collate what has been gained, to analyze at leisure so that other researchers may benefit if they will. Nothing more is open to us. We live, and in life we revere our lost comrade Mr. Gale.”

The professor and Theresa sat close together in the front seat of the van, gazing out over the convoluted skyline of jagged sandstone spires and massive bluffs. The girl saw none of this. Turned within, she recalled jeering at Ronny for a coward, tried to pretend how that would have spurred him. She thought this, but it did not help. A different kind of horror seized her: the astounding realization that what the professor told her made no sense, was hopelessly unbelievable.

“He wasn’t eager,” she said, “he wasn’t dedicated to anything, much less to your high-flown ideals. I talked to him this morning, heard the same old whining we always got from him. Ronny was an empty-headed, self-serving moron. He meant to cut and run at the first opportunity.”

“We all descend to moments of weakness,” Vorchek observed. “Think no more of that.”

Theresa continued, in a tone approximating accusation, “You did make contact with those others. You figured it out, maybe from those tapes. You did it last night. I was there, at the upper window.”

“You were present then?” Vorchek eyed her guiltily, a furtive, sidelong glance. He stroked his beard nervously. “Did you hear my words? Did you understand their response?”

“No. You were too far away. Their sounds were gibberish. What

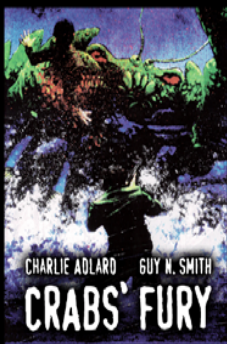
did they say to you, Professor?”

Vorchek relaxed visibly. “I have no idea. I did try to reach them last night, in a controlled setting, but my efforts failed. Hence, I felt no need to mention it; a slight conceit of mine.”

Theresa blinked back tears. Still an ugly thought tormented her. She stuttered, “His last words—he tried to tell me—Ronny said ‘he’ planned it, ‘he’ trapped him. Oh, Professor, what did he mean, who was he talking about?”

Vorchek said soothingly, “We shall never know. ‘He,’ ‘they,’ ‘it’; how does one refer to entities from beyond the pale? Our language groans under the load. Perhaps they did lure him to his doom in some fashion. That is compatible with the evil record of the Wilson House and the Hill of Stars. Terrible things happen there. It is our misfortune to have tasted the bitterness of a fresh occurrence as we strove to study the old. Spit out these useless doubts, my dear, leave be these questions until you have regained your senses. Tragedies happen, bidden or no. Let us get home. When you have collected yourself, all will seem right and proper as before.”

Theresa fervently hoped so. She wanted to believe that more than anything in the world. ●



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# MAGE RIDER

Mike W. Barr

It was his books he missed most, he had decided. This had made the first few hours of his journey pass—if not more quickly, then at least less slowly. But it was definitely the books, yes, rather than delicately blended drinks smelling of flower petals, or the court dances, or even the fine, high-ceilinged quarters he had had in the midst of the sophisticated bustle of the Shining City. At least, it was his books until he had to stop for the night. After a night with only a bedroll between him and the ground, the choice might be harder.

He turned again in his saddle, for no more than the sixth time that hour, to see the spires of the Shining City, which seemed to be sinking beneath the horizon. Back there his colleagues would be meeting for dinner, and then, it being the eve of the Endweek, taking in whatever merriment was to be had—and given that the Shining City was the largest on the Continent, there would be a great deal. Perhaps the Plumed Dancers, or the Lava Flows, or—

*Enough*, he told himself. He knew he shouldn't dwell on it. But he liked to. He wondered if his friends would miss him, would raise in his memory a glass of a libation that smelled of flower petals...

*Enough*. He turned in his saddle and urged his mount forward. It was none too happy, under the burden of all the books he had brought with him, let alone all the equipment he needed, but it plodded along well enough on its six legs, as he knew it would. He had designed that breed to support half again as much weight as he had put on it.

He had all the equipment his office carried—save one item, which he was on his way to acquire.

As the tallest spire of the Shining City was lost beneath the earth, he noted the first of the black onyx marker posts driven into the ground. A hundred yards away, in either direction, was yet another and more beyond that, extending in a great square containing hundreds of square acres—his jurisdiction. The town of New Harvest should be not far now.

"Town" was a term so generous as to be prodigal, he realized, as

he entered it. When the rough buildings first rose into view, he thought himself nearing the outskirts, until he realized this was the town center. Not the seat of culture in his jurisdiction, perhaps, but certainly the armpit.

His mount clopped down the main street, its hoofprints growing less perceptible in the waning light. The first person he saw was the town lamplighter, taking his time as he raised the globes on the gas stanchions with a hook mounted on a telescoping staff, then lighting them with a candle extended from another. The lamplighter turned to see him, taking in the MageRider's cloak, the hat, the boots, all finely made and representing his office, all too new.

"A good even," said the lamplighter. He was not an old man, but he walked with a pronounced limp, perhaps obtained in the recent war. His tone seemed even enough, but the MageRider thought he caught, in the lamplighter's eyes, a hint of curiosity. There would be a lot of that.

"It will be," said the MageRider, "if the local hostel isn't booked. Can you direct me to it?" He could indeed direct him to the hostel, fulfilling the MageRider's most fervent hope—that there was one. "You know," said the MageRider, against his better judgment, "your job would go more quickly if you simply placed that hook on a separate collar on the outside of your candle staff. Then you'd have only one staff to handle."

The lamplighter looked at him with eyes that did not seem to reflect the glowing lamp. Finally he said, "I'm paid by the hour," with an eloquent shrug.

"And good even to you," nodded the MageRider, dryly. Why had he bothered?

There was a hostel, but not much of one, the MageRider noticed as he entered the lobby, but it would beat sleeping outside. He approached the front desk, identified himself to a somewhat officious-looking clerk, and asked for a room, at the special rate to which his rank entitled him.

"I'm sorry, sir," sniffed the rat-faced clerk, in a tone that belied his words, "but we already have an officer staying here. And, in any case, I'd need to see some identification." His close-set eyes lowered their gaze to a few inches below the MageRider's chin.

"Of course," he replied, after a moment. Stupid of him. Of course, she would have the Cube. And she would have taken her own room at the law officers' rate. "Then a room at the regular rate. And make sure

I get a copy of the bill.” He would settle all this later.

After a change of clothes and a bath that was as hot as a place like this could supply, he opened one of his saddle bags and removed a flat object with a large square of specially treated cloth folded around it. He unwrapped it, revealing a piece of ivory slate, six inches by nine inches, with a frame of black oak. Taking a short, slender rod of wood with a hard black core from the same bag, he meditated over it for a moment, then began to write, the now-softened core of the stylus leaving black streaks behind on the slate.

His message complete, the MageRider sat back, closed his green eyes and concentrated. Far away, in the Shining City, there was an identical piece of ivory slate, hewn from the same rock. It was simply a matter of psychically attuning one to the other, and...

...Moments later, he felt a kind of squirming in his mind, a sensation he had once thought strange, but was now nearly commonplace. He opened his eyes, just in time to see the last of the fluid from the stylus reforming into the final letter of a new message.

YOUR ORDERS UNCHANGED [read the new message]. REPORT BACK WHEN THE OFFICE HAS BEEN TRANSFERRED.

Well, he had to at least see if he had been given a reprieve. He lifted the slate to put it away when he spied a small line of writing at its bottom:

KYLOS SENDS HIS REGARDS.

He swabbed the slate clean, using perhaps too much effort, a pulse pounding below his brow.

He left the hostel and tramped down the sidewalk, avoiding the numerous gaps in its boards, the odors of dinner from the kitchen seductive but ignored. He consulted with a few townspeople to point him in the right direction, but once he was within a few yards of it, he could virtually scent the magepower radiating from it.

The windows of the place held less road dust than those of any other storefront on the block, a sure sign of recent occupation. A lamp burned inside, though he could see no one. He smiled grimly, if he had to be here, he could at least enjoy this.

A low gong sounded, from no visible source, as the door opened. He could have deactivated it with a thought—the central office had never taken his recommendations to correct the flaws he noted in the design—but that would have looked suspicious, and he wanted to do this by the scroll. As he entered, he felt the security screen as he passed through it; few others would have, even fewer would have known how

to deactivate it; this would have been a simple use of his Gift, had he chosen to so use it.

The office itself was not actually spartan, that would have required intent. Rather, it was plain, dull, underfurnished, but by lack of effort instead of conscious intent. It was as bare and devoid of personality as a hostel room, and he was sure there were many others throughout this jurisdiction. The only personal touch was a print of the third revision of The MageRider’s Oath in a gilded frame that had obviously been cared for by its owner. He scanned a few lines of it, some of which he had written. A good deal of blather about “...Using my Gift to ensure the Good...” He turned away from it at the same moment that he had heard a sound from more deeply within the office.

He couldn’t see behind the angled doorway off the hall that led into darkness, though the furtive footfalls seemed to be coming from within it. His breath came more rapidly, not from nervousness, he realized after a few seconds, but because the air around him seemed to be growing thin, an assumption a semi-skilled interloper might have made, but one he knew to be false. He soft-focused his vision, and gazed not at the wall before him, but at the air. A shimmering aura around him, barely palpable even in the semi-darkness, became visible. As he thought. He gestured, a simple matter to de-spell the aura and let the autonomic portion of his brain resume its normal function. He inhaled gratefully, but not too deeply; he didn’t want his quarry to have that satisfaction.

“That’s far enough. Hands where I can see them,” she said. She gave the impression of being quite tall, but he soon realized that was more of an illusion caused by her carriage which was as straight as the fall of rain. She was of average height, barely up to the MageRider’s chin. Her hair, once as red as the skin of an apple, had aged into a hue more akin to that of frosted rust. Her face was not as lined as he had expected, given what Headquarters had told him to be her age, but it was beautifully characterized, like a death mask of a great actress or a poet. Her fingers were short and rather blunt, but moved with a great deal of facility, curling around a length of metal tubing inscribed with various sigils, its open end pointed toward him, its other end sealed.

And some inches below her chin, seeming to collect what little light there was in the office, hung a small bronze cube, simple but well-fashioned, its points, once sharp, rounded by years of wear. It had been that cube that the clerk of the hostel had sought, and failed to find, on him.

"Of course," replied the MageRider. He kept his hands in sight, fingers evenly extended, lips unmoving, save for that brief reply. A simple test of ability was one thing, but it was needlessly stupid to take chances after coming this far. However, he realized, being badly wounded during the transfer of office would almost certainly cause his recall... But no. A show of such incompetence would be seen as the deliberate attempt it was; either way it could result in an even worse posting—assuming there was any.

Eyes as blue as a winter sky surveyed him up and down, took in his robe he wore slung over one shoulder, the uniform he wore underneath. He had chosen the formal garb, feeling the effect might be worth it. "Well," she said finally, lowering the tube, "you took a lot of chances."

"I wanted to see if you were worth your reputation," he replied. "And I see you are."

"And if I had fired?"

"You wouldn't," he replied, easily, "not with your reputation. May I lower my hands now?"

"You may." She stashed the pipe in a loop on the inside of her cloak, the field cloak, made for active duty.

"MageRider Anra," he said, dipping his head, formally, "I am—"

"I know who you are," she said, smiling slightly. "I was pretty sure by the way you bypassed the security field."

"I was working on an improved version of that, before—" He clamped his lips shut, no need to bring that up.

"Before you were sent out here," Anra finished for him. She lowered herself behind the great wooden desk which seemed to hunker in one corner of the office like a dying creature. "Have a seat," she nodded, indicating a chair of similar pedigree. A drawer opened as she reached for it, into her hand seemed to hop two small glasses. From the depths of her tunic she produced a aged metal flask, covered in peeling gray calfskin with silver trim; the colors of the MageRiders, and proffered it to him, as he proffered his to her.

"Have a seat," she repeated. She poured herself a drink from his flask as he poured himself a drink from hers. Then they returned the flasks in a gesture that was as old as the office of the MageRider itself.

"So," he said, after a few seconds of studying the amber liquid, "this is New Harvest."

"You should have seen Old Harvest," said Anra, and they both laughed. "This will be pretty slow for you, after the City."

"I'm certain I'll be able to adjust," he replied, smiling evenly.

"We Riders didn't hear much of what went on," said Anra, studying him through the depths of her own glass. "There was something about a woman—"

"The Magistrate's daughter," said the MageRider, in a neutral tone. She probably felt he deserved this for that business with the security field, so before she said it, he did: "We were betrothed, yes. To have been married in the Second Season."

Anra's deep eyes were hidden now. "You cancelled it."

"That's right," he lied. Did his former fiancé' even recall the truth, after these months? That for the bride-to-be to cancel the marriage cost her family the bride's dowry, an expense even a Magistrate's family could ill afford, nowadays. And the shame and embarrassment could better be borne by a bachelor savant than a prominent socialite. And the penalty for incurring that shame was either a long immurement, or the most severe demotion possible to one of his position. And she had the most gorgeous eyes, like molten copper... "So here I am," he sighed. No need to mention friend Kylos' place in all this, it would serve no purpose save to give him a reputation as a talebearer.

"I had thought even a Chief Thaumaturgic Researcher was above court politics."

"No one," said the MageRider, "is above politics." He lifted his drink, but thought he should feign at least some interest. "So," he said, "what's the jurisdiction like? Are all the towns this small?"

"Some are even smaller," she smiled. She had a pleasant smile, warm and elusive, like a soft breeze on a summer's night. "After a while, they won't even seem like separate towns to you, more like different neighborhoods of one huge city." A certain lambency came to her eyes. "And you'll get to know all the people, like family..."

"Do you have any blood family?"

"No." She hoisted her glass. He duplicated the gesture with his, and the sound they made as they clinked in the twilight could have passed for music. "Well, here's to change—"

Before he could drink, a fearsome racket was heard from without.

"What was that?" he asked, glass halfway to his lips.

"I'll find out," she sighed, hoisting herself to her feet. "You finish your drink." But he put it down and followed her, his curiosity overriding his thirst. Besides, he had to establish his presence in this dunghill eventually.

The lamplighter and seemingly everyone else in the town had bolted themselves in for the night. The spaced glow of the lamps



seemed only to emphasize the emptiness of the street.

Yet there was someone about. He could feel it.

"Take the other side," hissed Anra, her hand going to her cloak as she moved away from him. "Move down the street and be prepared to back me up if I need you."

"There," he said, pointing several yards ahead. Three men in stained overalls had surrounded a flashily-dressed young woman and were shoving her from one to another with the fearsome playfulness of cats toying with a cornered mouse.

"They're early tonight," sighed Anra, withdrawing her hand, empty. "The Zebber Brothers. It's harvest time," she said to the MageRider, "and some of the locals have more money in their pockets now than they'll have at any other time of the year. For a few of them, it goes right to their heads."

"Among other places," said the MageRider. "Aren't bumpkins like these the constable's job?"

She looked at him coldly. "Our job is whatever it has to be, you should know that."

"Certainly. How do you want to handle this?"

"Carefully," she replied, as they advanced. "After all, I have to live with these people."

"And so will I."

"Yes, of course."

They approached the trio of young men; he noticed that their features bore the same broad jaw, the same low forehead, the same close-set eyes. Brothers, or at least first cousins. They continued to shove the young woman back and forth, as though unable to decide which of them wanted her first.

"All right, Zebbers," sighed Anra. The bumpkins stopped pushing the girl back and forth as they approached; one of them gave her a final shove outward. She collapsed to the ground before the MageRider with a little mew of pain.

He helped her to her feet, smelling too much perfume, seeing a young face prematurely aged by kohl applied too thickly. "Get home," he told her, not ungently. "And you might want to rethink your choice of profess—"

All his senses shut down.

When they returned, he realized why, albeit slowly. He had been struck in the back of the head by something quite solid, probably the butt of a club or the end of a staff. Possibly a rock thrown from a sling.

From behind. The act of returning to consciousness brought a fresh wave of pain, commingled with something quite different that he couldn't yet place. When he opened his eyes he retched all over his dress trousers. At least he had resisted the lure of the hostel dining room.

Smoke tanged the air, the wood used to build the fire had been wet, possibly even green. Kindled in haste, perhaps. Still, the redolence from the burning wood was insufficient to mask the odors of four thoroughly unwashed bodies contained in an enclosed space. He lay with his hands bound behind him against what felt like a wooden wall, the chinks between its planks filled with mud. Looking around the room, he saw four figures limned by the firelight, the fourth sharing the same thick features he had seen in the other three.

The five of them seemed to be alone.

The fourth turned and saw him move. Too late he realized he had virtually told them he was conscious when concealing that could have been a valuable advantage. Live and learn—but the prerequisite to that was living.

The fourth Zebber Brother—who had a beard like a mass of tangled roots, encrusted with the remains of his last several meals—grunted and gestured toward the MageRider. The others rose and approached him, one of them throwing something large and dark over a roughhewn chair. His cloak.

The MageRider realized now why he was cold. The Zebbers had gone through his cloak pocket by pocket, removing anything they could find. One of them held a length of metal tubing, similar to that which Anra had held, open end pointed toward him, its other end sealed. Another held a small stoppered vial which contained a dull powder; he had poured out a palmful and blew it into the air. The MageRider smiled, almost indulgently, as if at apes going through a drawer of flatware, until a third Zebber gestured at the cloud of powder which immediately sparked into light.

The MageRider frowned, another reaction he should have controlled. That was one of the reasons for the ache in the back of his head; he was reacting to what he now realized was the vestigial Gift the Zebbers seemed to share. He had read reports of families possessing one Gift between them and using it almost instinctively and for one moment he was Chief Thaumaturgic Researcher again, wondering what he could learn about the nature of the Gift as shared between family members—

*Enough.* They stood a few feet from him as the lead Zebber looked down, smiling with a proud contempt, like a moron who has just torched the local library. “You woke up,” he said, finally.

*Brilliant observation,* thought the MageRider. “Wasn’t I supposed to?” he asked, meekly. He had had practice with enforced meekness, these past few weeks.

“Matters not,” said a second. “Strugglers’re just a little tougher t’do.” In this instance, the exact meaning of the verb “to do” was crystalline clear.

“I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t point that at me,” he said, to the one holding the metal tube. He prayed the lout would look into the open end, but no such luck. “You look like reasonable men,” continued the MageRider, trying for once to keep sarcasm out of his voice. “I don’t know what you want, but whatever you’re being paid, I’ll double it.”

“We got all your money,” said the third, with thick logic.

“I can get more,” said the MageRider, patiently. “Headquarters will pay to keep me alive.” He waited to see if this spark would catch in the tinder of their minds and decided to give it a faint breath of help. “In the Shining City? They have lots of money. More than you’re being paid.”

“Who says we’re bein’ paid?” asked another.

“I take that for granted. Men like you are too smart to work for free.” They grunted noncommittally. “I could get you wives, too. From the Shining City. You could even go there to pick them out.”

This seemed to hold their interest; they turned to talk amongst themselves, muttering like a bunch of hogs around a trough. The MageRider tried to free his hands, but found whatever cord of animal hide they were bound with to be tied too tightly to undo. Still, there was hope. He tried to remember his training for situations like this, and hoped he was half as good with the physical as with the thaumaturgic.

As the Zebbers muttered amongst themselves, he concentrated on the fire across the room, specifically the heat it radiated. He drew it toward him, welcomed it, nurtured it like an old friend. He directed it behind him, to the bonds around his hands. It was a fine distinction to keep it from burning his hands themselves, and not one he was always able to achieve, but after long seconds the bonds began to smoulder. He prayed the Zebbers didn’t differentiate the smell of burning bonds from the other odors in the room as he drew his feet under him.

He was concentrating so thoroughly it took him a few seconds to

realize the Zebbers were standing before him again. This was called to his attention by the toe of a boot gouged into his side; he hoped they thought he was still fighting off unconsciousness. “Well?” he smiled encouragingly. All good friends here.

“We kin buy wives with the money we’re gettin’,” rumbled the lead Zebber. “Goin’ for more is risky. Just plain greedy.”

Reasonable extortionists yet. What is the world coming to? “I’m sorry,” said the MageRider, “I can’t quite hear you...” He feigned deafness as his hands pulled against the smouldering bonds.

The Zebber looked back at his brothers in a glance filled with contempt for the city boy and stepped forward a little, between the MageRider and the others...

...At the exact moment the bonds around the MageRider’s hands collapsed into ashes. He leaped, motivated as much by the pain in his hands and in the seat of his pants as by the need for action, knitting the fingers of his hands together in one fist, slamming it into the bottom of the lout’s jaw. The Zebber fell back with a cry of pain, made less articulate by the fact that his teeth had chopped off the tip of his tongue; it flew across the room like a little comet, crimson tail sparkling in the firelight.

The other Zebbers started toward him, snarling. In his panic, with his cloak across the room, he could think of only one thing: the middle brother still held the small box of powder. He thought of the box of powder and closed his eyes as, an instant later, it exploded in a burst of light that made the fire seem like a guttering candle.

The Zebbers, blinded, cried as one and clapped their hands to their eyes, tottering around the cabin like drunks. But their hearing was still that of men raised in the wild, and they were still between him and the door.

Then he had a bit of luck. The brother who had bitten his tongue had grabbed the metal tube and waved it, attempting to point it at the MageRider, who was trying not to oblige. His pain probably fueled his primitive Gift, enabling him to fire the tube. Metal pellets shot from it with tiny metal tones, almost like wind chimes, with sufficient speed to pierce three men of the MageRider’s size standing in a row. As the Zebber brother’s arm swung wide, The MageRider dashed toward him, attempting to wrest the tube from him. Instead it discharged again, several times, its shells striking the blinded ones. Their rage erupted anew, which—in another example of the kind of primitive, collective Gift they possessed—was enough. Something stirred across the room,

he diverted his gaze from the berserker louts to size up what he assumed—with his luck—to be a new threat. Instead, he noted his cloak, twitching and jerking as of its own accord...

...No, he realized. The undisciplined Gift of the Zebbers was acting on the devices in his cloak, it was about to—

—It did explode, not with fire, but with a soundless expansion of theurgic force that rebounded in the enclosed hovel, whose furnishings and walls began to smoke as the contained energy tried to escape. The Zebbers' beards were ignited, their greasy clothes and eyelashes soon followed.

The MageRider scurried across the cabin as best he could, barely dodging two of them. He got outside, extinguished the few feathers of smoke that had begun to rise from his own garb, began to run as far from the cabin as he could, then stopped. He turned, broke off a thick branch from a nearby tree and wedged it between the ground and the roughhewn cabin door.

Just in time. The cabin door bent a little, pounded upon from within, as the column of smoke rising from the cabin's lone chimney grew wider. Soon the entire roof was aflame, and seconds after that, the roof collapsed, soon adding the pungency of burning hair and flesh to the tang of charred wood.

He waited for several minutes while the cabin burned itself out. He saw movement twice, but it was just the remains of a table and a shelf collapsing under their own weight. Then all he saw was the last shimmering wisps of theurgic energy escaping into the night.

When he was sure nothing remained alive he made his way slowly to one of the mounts, fretfully eying the fire, calmed it using a technique he had been taught by the stablemaster in the Shining City, and started back to town. He felt like a man three times his age. For one copper he would have deserted this perilous new job and taken his chances as a fugitive.

Except now, for the first time in weeks, anger had broken through his fatalistic calm. He knew what had happened, and he knew what had to be done about it.

The main street of New Harvest seemed preternaturally quiet to him, but that could be attributed to his mood. A few lights flickered behind shutters, he saw no other signs of life. He stopped at the storefront before which he had been assaulted, just—how long ago? He realized he had no idea what time it was; he didn't like that. Only a few

marks in the dirt remained to show the encounter had ever happened.

He tied the mount two doors down from the local office and crept toward it, as quietly as his aching muscles would let him. He saw no lights from the front, but the shade was tightly drawn and tethered shut for the night.

This time he did use his Gift to bypass the security screen and override the aura; he didn't care how it would be perceived. The office was very much as he had left it; the glass of liquor poured for him from MageRider Anra's flask still sat on the desktop, undisturbed. *Not much of a monument*, he thought.

He never did know what he had done to make himself heard. But the litany came to him from the angled doorway off of the office: "That's far enough. Hands where I can see them." What little light was in the office again seemed concentrated on the bronze cube hanging from the chain around her neck and on the metal tube held in her hand.

He realized, with a fresh burst of self-contempt, that he had come unarmed. He had intended to stop at the local constabulary and recruit some help, but his anger had overridden his common sense. He tried to recall what percentage of MageRiders lived through their first day on the job, but gave up. He could look it up only if he was able, by which eventuality he wouldn't care.

"Oh, it's you," Anra said, relief overtaking her voice. "I was worried sick about—"

"About what you'd tell Headquarters?" said the MageRider, dryly. "I'm sure the apparent truth would be plausible enough: 'Novice MageRider captured and murdered by local inbred bohunks.' Uncommon enough to seem unrehearsed, but feasible enough to warrant only a cursory investigation. They'd probably even put you in charge of it, there's little enough love lost between Headquarters and me."

"You're delirious," she said. "Sit down and I'll get you—"

"I'll stand, thanks. The Constables should be here any minute."

Her lined face remained impassive for a moment, then creased into a smile, like a leather purse opening. "That's a bluff. And you have no proof."

"It's obvious enough, to anyone with eyes and the brains to use them—I have the former, but lacked the latter for a long time. There were only three Zebbers harassing that prostitute in the street, the fourth was hanging back. Why? To assault me. Because he had been told to. Paid to. By the person who had called my attention to their antics in the first place. By you. Your alternative if your first plan failed.

"I don't expect you to admit anything, even just between us. But even before I arrived, you had prepared this, you had the Zebbers waiting. But why?" He shrugged, hoping to elicit some reaction from her, some show of temper or anger he could use. "Because this job was your life. No family. Few friends. And nothing in retirement to look forward to but idleness and waiting to die. It was easy to rationalize the death—the murder—of a new MageRider, an unproven quantity with a bad record, who didn't deserve the honor of serving. For the Corps, right?"

"That's your proof?"

"I didn't say it was."

She said nothing for a long time. When she finally spoke, her voice came thickly, trying to disguise its uncertainty. "Perhaps you'd better put your hands back up." Light danced along the metal tube as she leveled it at him.

"There's my proof," he smiled.

For a split-second, something like bafflement showed in her eyes—bafflement and surprise. He realized he had made a mistake, he didn't know as much as she thought, or feared, he knew. Then the bafflement was gone, replaced by a kind of desperate hope. She tried to overturn the desk, and he sprang for her, sending her a step back. But she still had the tube. A crease in her brow grew deeper as she concentrated. The pellet darted forth from the tube, narrowly missing the MageRider.

He looked at her and gestured, hoping the action would have symbolic value. The tube twitched in her hands as his Gift met hers, preventing the tube from discharging.

"Drop it," he said. "Damn it, drop it." But she didn't, and he continued to pour it on.

He could see the panic even in her deep eyes; she tried to drop the tube, just a second too late. It exploded, showering the office in all directions with metal fragments and shot. He ducked, then rose, marshaling his will for another—

He needn't have bothered. The shrapnel had gone in all directions, but she had been right on top of it. The desk had largely been spared, but she was beyond saving. He got a last glimpse into her eyes before they died. What he saw there gave him no regrets.

The coach from the Shining City which bore the Inquisitors arrived in hours. As daylight illumined New Harvest—making it no more

comely in the day than it had been at night—he conducted the Inquisitors to the office. There they examined the spell of stasis he had cast, made certain it had gone undisturbed, and examined the scene and the body which was still warm. That took some getting used to, even for him, who had helped author the spell.

"All the facts seem to fit your account," said one, at last, grudgingly.

"Then I think we can have the—"

"But we have no evidence that your account is the truth," said the second one. "There exists no proof of MageRider Anra's intent. Perhaps her actions toward you were based simply on her fear of you..."

"And of my reputation, which preceded me?"

"Just so," nodded the first Inquisitor. The Cube—this one silver—hanging from a chain around his neck contrasted nicely with the ebony of his robes. "The Council was quite emphatic about ascertaining all the facts. Absent some proof of intent of hostility on MageRider Anra's part, this matter must be turned over to the Council, for further investigation."

"While I am under confinement," he sighed.

"Those are the Statutes, MageRider," said the second Inquisitor. "Minister Kylos was quite emphatic about seeing that the Statutes were observed. If you will come with us—"

"One moment," he snapped. The Inquisitors fell silent, more from surprise at being spoken to thusly than from any desire to cooperate. There had been proof—Anra had as much as admitted that—but he had been too dull to see it, and that had given her her last hope. There must be something else, something he didn't realize, but—

"They're early tonight," Anra had said, of the Zebbers' enthusiasm.

Of course. They were early. They were the reserve plan...! "Inquisitors," he bowed formally. "Observe." With their eyes on him he approached the desk—the desk MageRider Anra had tried to overturn, though he had been nowhere near it—and extended the index and middle fingers of his right hand.

With one motion he flicked over the drink Anra had poured for him from her flask, and smiled as the liquid rapidly ate its way into the varnish and the wood beneath with a long susurrant, like a swarm of bees.

"With your permission," he said, bending over the body. Without waiting he removed the Cube from the corpse and placed the chain around his neck.



Its weight was not imperceptible, yet not so heavy as he had feared.●





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## MARKET VALUES

Jenny Schwartz

Freo Markets are a world unto themselves, over a hundred years old, their limestone walls pitted and grey, the concrete underfoot swelling and subsiding with the traffic of generations. The market stalls are closely guarded investments; inherited generally, since people would die rather than relinquish their stall.

Everything you could want is sold at the Freo Markets: from seafood to books, from surfboards to insect pets. Rick Pucelli sold body parts.

"Healthy lungs, barely used. Surprise that special smoker in your life."

"Lovely, fresh heart; let it pump for you."

"Eyes, madam? A fine selection: Brown, hazel, blue—just for you."

Rick was a third generation stall holder. His grandfather, fresh from Sicily, sold vegetables. His father had sold crystals to the New Age crowd. Rick sold body parts. All adhered to the family motto: Give the customers what they want.

"Ears, guaranteed sound."

"Excuse me." A young man interrupted the market chant.

Rick stopped. He knew his customers, and this wasn't one of them. Sure, the young man smelled of desperation, but it wasn't a life desperation. No, add together his youth, his poverty, the uncertain but determined terror in his eyes—a cadet journalist. Rick sighed. Why was it his stall was such a magnet for journalists starting out? His business model was nothing startling. "What?"

"Mr. Pucelli, I'm Alan Evans, a journalist with the Freo Screamer. I'd like to interview you for an article on your stall."

"No—" Rick saw an elderly lady lean forward and adjust her hearing aid. Damn. A customer. "No problem. I'm always happy to answer questions. Come back after five o'clock. You can interview me while I close up."

"Thank you." Having gained something, Alan retreated, standing on the old woman's toe before disappearing into the crowd.

"Can I offer you a seat?" Rick caught the woman's arm. "Young people are careless." Rick assessed the old lady's pallor and blue edged lips with a professional eye. A strong prospect was well worth the aggravation of agreeing to the interview. Besides, the kid's editor would never publish the story. She had seen too many versions of it as cadet journalists came and went.

"Mr. Pucelli?"

"Oh, you're back." Rick stacked a shallow box of faces—cosmetic transplants were the wave of the future—into the secure storage at the rear of the stall. "Well, go on, ask your questions."

"Um." Alan stared greenly at a tray of tongues.

"From America," Rick said. "Good healthy tongues from America. I reckon it's 'cause they exercise them a lot over there."

Alan didn't catch the joke. "What do you do with old stock?"

"Pickle it, mostly, and sell it cheap to the teaching hospitals. The surgery students learn how to handle transplant organs." Rick's chest expanded. He halted, still holding a boxed liver. "Do you know, they send their students here to learn from me how to recognise a quality organ. Pretty good, hey?" Rick juggled the box to one hand and poked Alan in the chest.

"Uh, yes. Um, do you ever get fetish buyers or cannibals?"

Rick's transient good humour evaporated. "No."

"How do you know? Do you ask to see a medical degree?"

"I can tell, all right? The ghouls are too eager. There's no sadness. They don't understand suffering, not like my real customers."

"You ready to go, Rick?"

"Got a journo with me," Rick shouted back. His brother's head appeared around the corner of the stall, studied Alan, then disappeared.

"My brother," said Rick. "He sells the herbs, I sell the body parts. Together we got the health field covered." Rick moved quickly, putting his stock away and swung shut the heavy fridge door, securing the goods. "Any more questions? My brother and I share a ride, so I need to get going."

"Where do you get your stock from?"

"All around the world. Lungs from Scandinavia, livers from the Middle East, hearts from Africa. I also take orders for long time clients, like hospitals. That it?" Rick rattled his keys, making it clear that that was it.

"Um, yes. Thank you."

"No problem." Rick rolled the shutter down on the stall. "I look forward to seeing the published article."

Rick's brother, Carl, came and stood beside him, and they watched Alan lope away. "Cruel. You know his article will never be published."

"All part of learning the game," Rick answered. He turned and looked at the two stalls. They had divided the space of their grandfather's stall between them. "A good business," Rick said with satisfaction. "Did you sell any zombie weed?"

"One packet."

"Any good?"

Carl shrugged. "Maybe."

"I hope so." Rick jingled his keys again. "I hate it when the guy goes to the trouble of killing himself and then we find his organs are so shitty they're not worth buying."

"You always buy something, though," Carl pointed out.

"Can't help it. I feel sorry for the family." Zombie weed was an easy death, painless and it kept the organs fresh, but still death was death. Suicide didn't cancel grief.

"Sometimes I think we should have stuck with sourcing organs from around the world." Carl carefully didn't look at his brother. Rick generally got blind, stinking drunk after dealing with a zombie weed death.

"You know the zombie weed deaths are better," Rick said flatly. "The weed wipes the organs clean of memories."

"So what's that to us?" Carl demanded. "Your customers should be grateful to be alive, not complaining because their hearts remember other loves, or their eyes see the world differently."

"I know," sighed Rick. "But I can't shake the family motto."

"Give the customers what they want," the brothers recited together.

"Whatever the price," Rick added.

The next day was Monday, Rick's receival day. If people were going to suicide and provide him with fresh organs, they tended to do so after the prolonged desperation of a weekend.

Rick drove to the markets alone on Mondays since he would need the van to collect the organs. Before the markets opened, he put in a couple of hours of useful work talking with morgue attendants and police whom he paid to keep him informed of opportunities. And then, there was the answering machine.

It was never explicitly stated, but anyone who bought zombie weed received Carl's business card, on the back of which was Rick's details and an invitation, "Freelance organ supply welcome." After some weekends, there could be as many as five hesitant voices on the answering machine.

"Rick Pucelli? Just wanted you to know I'm going to commit suicide. I'll be using zombie weed, so if you're interested in my organs, my family can be contacted at .... I hope you give them a good price."

Poor bastards, thought Rick. He wrote down the names and contact details, and glanced up. Alan Evans stood watching, shifting uneasily from foot to foot. "What do you want?"

"I wondered, um. You know, for a more, um, in depth, uh, story...."

"Hurry it up."

"Can I come with you?" Alan asked in a rush. He handed Rick his leather jacket, fumbling with it. "If I could watch you collecting the organs, it would give my story depth."

Rick shrugged on his jacket and scowled. "Ghoul." Alan wanted to use the families' grief as copy. "No." He strode away, but glancing back he saw Alan smiling. "What a—"

From the mortuary, Rick drove to a brown, drab, block house in an outer suburb. A scrawny rose grew by the front door. It was pathetic how some people never abandoned hope.

Rick braced himself to be professionally sympathetic.

The grief-shrunken woman inside couldn't believe his words. "You mean you don't want any of his organs?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Jones. Your husband was a smoker, wasn't he?"

"He quit two months ago." As if that somehow erased thirty years of nicotine consumption.

"I'm sorry," Rick said again. His voice dragged. "Perhaps I could sell his hands."

"His hands?" For the first time, the mutilation of her husband's body for money seemed to strike the woman. "Take them, take them," she sobbed. "He thought his death would give us money."

Rick walked heavily out of the house, carrying the consent form which would allow him to take Mr. Jones's hands from the mortuary.

A skinny kid ducked down too slow in his car. Rick stiffened, his head came up. "Are you following me?" he challenged through the open window of Alan's car.

"It's a free country." But Alan's voice shook.

Rick glared, then noticed the earpiece Alan wore. "You bastard.

You bloody bugged me." Rick's hands twitched. He wanted to grab the little ferret and ram him into the steering wheel. "My stall, four o'clock—or I call your editor."

Rick got into his van, stripped his jacket, and dropped the bug out the window. In his rear view mirror, he saw the cadet slumped over his steering wheel. If he had any sense—which Rick doubted—the kid would make the meeting. His editor would rip his hide off for bugging a respectable local businessman like Rick.

At four o'clock, Rick's stall was empty of customers, and Alan showed sufficient self-preservation to turn up.

"Sit down," said Rick. His temper had cooled. But grief had to be respected, even by journalists. "Let me explain the facts—"

"Facts!" shouted Alan. He waved a crumpled computer printout. "I'll give you facts. Why didn't you tell the woman about Gria? I checked. Mr Jones killed himself using zombie weed. Gria, if taken within twenty-four hours, counteracts zombie weed's effect. It literally brings people back from the dead, and since Mr Jones's organs weren't worth anything, why not restore his life? I'll give you facts. I'm not the criminal here."

"You think you're smart, don't you, kid?" Rick brushed aside the printed evidence. "You should get your facts straight. The Global Medical Board undertook a definitive study of Gria. It doesn't work. It's an old wives' tale. Call yourself a journalist? Ha."

Rick stood up. Alan shrivelled in his chair. "I wasn't going to tell your editor. I respect initiative, even if it was inappropriate, exploiting grief; but this crude blackmail attempt. No way. Expect to hear from your boss." Rick turned away and after a minute, Alan crept out.

"He's gone." Carl's head appeared around the corner of the stall.

Rick flung himself backwards into the chair. "I couldn't believe my ears. Gria. The kid's an idiot. As if I'm going to administer the zombie weed antidote. As if I want everyone to know zombie weed organs are so fresh because I take them from a living body. Bah." Rick couldn't find words to express his disgust with Alan's naivety.

Carl nodded. "Good thing the Medical Board accepted the bribes to throw the trial."

"It was in their interests, too. Doctors rely on the organs we supply." Rick slammed out of his chair. "Bastards."

Rick sat at the bar, writing out the cheque he would send to Mrs Jones, inflating the price for her husband's hands out of sympathy. He

addressed the envelope as he swallowed his second bourbon.

"Want me to post that?" Sarah, the bar attendant, knew the routine.

"Sure, thanks. Sarah?"

"Yeah." This, too, was part of the routine.

"Can you smell death on me?"

"No, Rick. Only bourbon and old aftershave." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

Rick put a fifty on the bar, a large tip. "You know the market, don't you, Sarah? Always give the customers what they want."

She watched him walk out, and sighed. "And a little bit of your soul." ●

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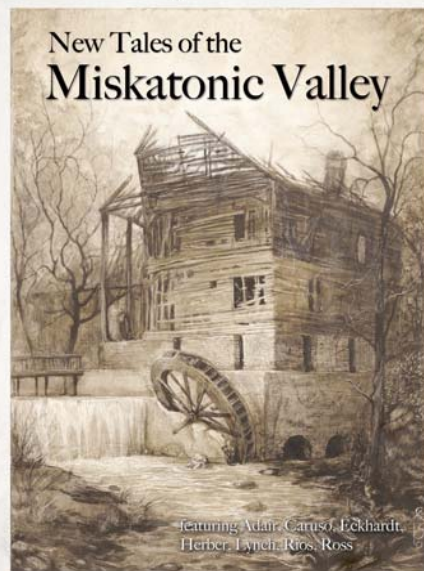
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## ANIMAL RIGHTS

### Steve Calvert

"Are you ready to order yet, ladies?"

"Have you got anything that isn't meat?" the fattest of the three women asked.

"We've got fish."

The three women exchanged glances.

"No, not fish. Fish is no good either... Mel-an-ie," the fat woman said, reading from the name tag on Mel's blouse. "Fish are living things. They have *feelings*, just like *all* living things."

The woman's two friends, nodded agreement.

"Yeah, that's right," the red haired one said.

"Too bleeding right," her blonde friend added.

The three of women exchanged glances and the fat one returned her attention to Mel.

"What about tofu? Got any *tofu*, Melanie?"

"Tofu? I don't know. I don't think so. I'll have to go and check." Tofu? What the hell was that anyway, some kind of pudding or something? Mel turned to walk away, but the woman caught hold of her skirt.

"Don't bother yourself. All we want is something that *isn't* made from meat of some kind?"

"You could have chips with—"

"Chips? Ha! Is that the best you can do?" It was the redhead speaking now.

"Or salad. We've got salad." Mel was getting a headache. She didn't need this.

"So that's it, is it?" Still the redhead. "Chips or salad?"

"Beans on toast?"

The three women exchanged glances again and smirked at each other.

Mel, oh so definitely, did not need this. It had been a long shift and her feet were already aching. With the oncoming headache, she was aching at both ends.

"Everything alright out there, Mel?" Gary called from the kitchen. All she could see was his face, his big white hat, and his fingers. The rest of him was still behind the kitchen door. Mel nodded, and he disappeared again.

"Yes, *you're* alright, aren't you, Melanie?" the fat woman said. "Pity the same can't be said for the poor animals that you dish up in here." The woman might not believe in eating meat, Mel thought, but whatever she did eat, she obviously believed in eating an awful lot of it.

"The pigs don't exactly feel in tip-top condition either, you know," Blondie wanted her say too. "As they trot into the gas chamber. That's how they kill, them you know. They gas the poor little bleeders."

The restaurant had fallen silent. No one was eating. When the women's voices began to rise, everyone's attention had diverted to the table in the corner of the room. One man, at a table near the door, sat with his fork frozen in front of his face, half a sausage hanging from the end of it.

Mel's cheeks began to burn.

"Are those *leather* shoes you're wearing?" The fat woman demanded.

"Look like bleeding leather to me."

"Yeah, they're leather alright."

"You're wearing dead-animal-skin on your feet, lady. Do you know that? Dead-animal-skin."

"Right. That's it!" Mel's temper was burning now, along with her cheeks. "Yes. I'm wearing leather shoes—my choice. I *like* leather shoes. They allow my feet to breath. And yes, we *do* serve meat here. People eat it and people enjoy it. *I* enjoy it. Later on, before I go home, I will probably have a burger—also my choice. Like it or not, animals are a natural part of the food chain—"

"Look Melan—"

"But! If you ladies *don't* want to eat meat, that's *your* choice. If you'd prefer a salad or something, that is also your choice."

"I don't think I like your attit--"

"And if you *don't*, then you are, of course, free to leave. That is also *your* choice."

"Bleeding cow."

"Right! One rare stake coming up, madam."

Melanie stormed away from the table and headed for the kitchen. A round of applause rose from the other tables and the fat woman

jumped up and made as if to follow Mel, but Gary seemed to appear from nowhere and intercepted her.

Mel didn't wait to see what happened. She was fuming.

"Feeling better now?" Gary asked, placing his hand on her shoulder.

"They gone?"

"They've gone."

"Then I'm feeling better. How'd you get rid of them?"

"Kicked them out on their asses."

"Really?"

A smile lit up his face. "No. I felt like it, but I just told them that the police were on the way and they vamoosed."

"I'm sorry, Gary, I don't think I handled that very well."

"No? Well, there's a room full of people out there that might disagree with you. Hell, girl. You got a standing ovation. I don't think *anyone* has *ever* done that before."

Mel didn't know what to say.

"Anyway, fancy a burger? Sandy can manage out there on her own for a while."

Mel listened to the door click shut behind her. She shuddered. It was cold tonight. Winter was definitely on its way. She turned up the collar of her jacket and began walking. Apart from a couple of drunks, whose eyes seemed to be welded to Mel's legs, the streets were deserted. Fortunately the drunks' eyes were the only thing following her. Their feet were heading in the opposite direction. Mostly, anyway. The drink seemed to have given them a mind of their own, and that mind was a bit indecisive to say the least—pavement one minute, gutter the next.

Mel's feet knew exactly where they were going. Home. They were sore and they were tired. Thankfully, her headache was gone. The heels of her shoes tapped out her progress along the pavement and if it was a lonely sound, it wasn't lonely for long. Other feet were rushing to keep it company.

Mel glanced over her shoulder.

And saw the three women from the restaurant. The fat one was leading. She was smiling and it wasn't a pleasant smile. Despite the women's supposed hatred of leather, Mel knew with absolute certainty that they were after her skin. Normally the irony would have amused.



Not now.

Animals had rights, did they? They were treated unfairly, were they? Well, what about three on one, was that fair? Mel didn't think so. She started to run. With tired feet in shoes that pinched, Mel ran.

She turned left at the top of the street and looked back.

Still coming.

God, all that blubber wasn't slowing the big woman down at all. It was dancing a jig as it came, her breasts swinging as fast as her arms, but it wasn't slowing her down. Maybe her synthetic shoes with the sensible heels gave her an advantage over Mel. Mel didn't know, but she did know that she would have increase her pace. Reaching down, she took off first one, and then the other shoe, and ran with them in her hands. At least if they caught her she would have something to defend herself with.

As she ran pieces of grit cut into the soles of Mel's feet and she knew she could kiss her pantyhose goodbye. Better her hose than her ass, though. She looked back again and saw that she had opened up the gap.

"Fucking bitch!"

"Cow!"

Even their voices sounded violent. Mel took a left, down an alleyway.

Too late, she realized it was a dead end.

She turned around. Too late again. Her exit was blocked.

"Got you now, you bleeding bitch."

"Not so smart with your mouth now, are you?"

"Look, I don't know what your problem is, but I just want to get home, okay?"

"I just want to get home." The blonde one was obviously part parrot. Perhaps that explained her passion for animal rights.

"The thing is, Melanie, we don't have a problem." The fat woman, who was now a fat, sweaty, and very probably very smelly woman, led her two consorts further into the alley. "It's people like you who are the problem. If you think that you're scared now, just think how the poor cows feel when they're led into the slaughter house..."

Mel began backing away. You could never find a policeman when you needed one.

"And why is that, Melanie? Just so that people like you—"

"Fucking bitch!" Red was getting herself nicely worked up now.

"—Can eat their poor, dead, murdered flesh."

Mel kept backing away, but didn't see the black bin bag behind her. She tripped and landed, painfully, on her rump, dropping her shoes in the process. She was soon back on her feet again, but it didn't matter. The fat woman was quick to act on her advantage. She flew at Mel and slammed her back onto the ground. The woman was so heavy that Mel could hardly breathe. As she struggled for breath Blondie and Red each took one of her arms and pinned her hands down against the cold, damp cobbles.

"Just another part of the food chain, eh? I think that's what you said. Well, that's bull, that's what I say."

"Fucking 'A'. Bitch."

"Barbaric, that's what it is."

Mel struggled but it was useless. "And what you're doing right now isn't barbaric? I'm a human being for Christ's sakes. Don't human beings have rights? Aren't they supposed to be more important than animals?"

"We're all animals, sweetheart. We're just the kind that walks on two legs instead of four, that's all."

"Screw all this bleeding talking, Chas. Let's cut the fucking bitch." The blonde let go of Mel's arm for a second and fished a knife out of her pocket. That left the redhead with both Mel's arms to contend with while her friend opened the blade.

Mel managed to pull her right hand free. A vodka bottle had spilled from the black bag. Mel picked it up and swung it at the fat woman's head. Continuing the same arc that her arm was already following, she slashed open one of the redhead's cheeks with the now broken bottle. Red screamed and raised both hands to protect a face that already matched her hair.

Mel wrestled her way out from underneath the fat woman (Chas?) and climbed to her feet—

—Only to be sent sprawling against the wall when Blondie hit her from the side. From the pain in her shoulder blade, Mel realized that she had not been merely shoved, but that Blondie's knife had been shoved into her. It hurt like hell.

Some of the redhead's blood had splashed onto Mel's cheek. She reached up and wiped it off with her finger.

Licked the finger.

Smiled.

It had been a long time. Too long. Her blouse grew tight against her skin and she listened to the stitching ripping open on the shoulders of



her jacket.

"Oh Shit! Shit! Chas, Laura! Something strange is happening here."

Chas said nothing. Laura said she needed an ambulance.

Mel watched Blondie backing away from her. She could hear Red's panicked breathing. She could even hear the beating of Chas's heart. Soft, blonde hair that was as fine as silk erupted from Mel's every pore and her French manicure became something much more deadly.

"You," Mel growled. "Are just another part of the food chain." And her stomach growled its agreement.

She turned.

Sprang.

The screaming didn't last long and, some time before it ended, Mel realized just how tired of burgers she was.

And of always trying to do the right thing. ●



## NIGHT FRIGHTS

Benjamin W. Olson

By the time I was fully awake, I was in the living room. My ribcage shuddered, barely able to contain my heaving lungs and stammering heart. The clock on the VCR glowed 3:12. In its green light, the room was a nightmare maze; black diagonals slashed across the pale walls from chairs, picture frames, darkened lamps. I scoured these shadows, my eyelids stretched wide, searching for some furtive movement, some sign of the thing that had ripped me from my sleep and sent me running from my bedroom in a blind terror.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for, because I wasn't sure what I had seen. I wasn't even sure I'd seen anything. The only thing I knew was that I was afraid. My blood slammed through me, electric with adrenaline. My knees shook. I was insensible with fear.

3:12. The colon on the digital display flashed on and off with a leisurely rhythm, mocking the frantic pace of my own pulse.

Nothing flitted in the dim corners, and nothing scuttled across the wooden floor. No dark figure menaced me from the doorway, and nothing rustled or rattled in the nighttime stillness. I stood in my underwear in the green glow, and ran a hand through my lank, sweaty hair, and saw that I was alone. I tried to calm down.

It was almost 3:30 before sleep seemed possible. I stumbled back to my bedroom and flipped on the light. The bedding was in chaos: blankets twisted, sheet torn from one corner of the mattress, pillow at the wrong end. My own handiwork. Other than that, the coast was clear—of course. Sleep was already stealing up on me, so I half-heartedly fixed up the bed and wriggled into it.

As my senses faded into dreamless slumber, I heard a door close, but in apartment buildings one hears all sorts of things at all hours of the night.

When Friday morning came to Boston, a noncommittal drizzle was falling from a sheet of heavy gray clouds. It was not the sort of morning that makes one excited to get out of bed. Nevertheless, I rose at two snooze cycles after 7:00 and creaked my way into the kitchen to start

some coffee. As I spooned grounds into Thursday's filter, I glanced over at a half-full bag of Cheetos, sitting open on the counter. I frowned at my own carelessness.

"I guess you just really want some pet cockroaches, huh?" I muttered to myself. The temptation to talk aloud to oneself becomes too great to resist after several months of living alone. The bag crackled noisily as I twisted and tied it.

After a hasty shower, I half-ran, half-fell down the stairwell of my building with my travel mug in one hand and my car keys in the other. I burst through the heavy first-floor door and nearly sent Mrs. Flanagan flying across the foyer, cane and all.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry, Mrs. Flanagan."

"That's perfectly all right, sweetie, I'm still in one piece. But you know, you wouldn't have to run in the mornings if you didn't use that snooze button." She regarded me with a grandmotherly smirk. I still have no idea how old Mrs. Flanagan is. She is the sort of lady who could be 65 or 105, or anywhere between.

I smiled sheepishly. "You're probably right. I'm just not a morning person."

She nodded, and there was a knowing glimmer in her eye. She has very young-looking eyes.

"I should say you aren't a morning person. I heard you again last night, racing and stomping around." Mrs. Flanagan lives directly below me.

"Oh, I'm really sorry about that."

"Think nothing of it, I went right back to sleep. What was it this time, sweetie? Spiders? Lizards? A lunatic with a knife?"

I laughed, trying to be personable. I was late for work, and this was not the first time Mrs. Flanagan had breached this unwelcome subject in conversation. But after nearly clobbering her with the door, I figured I owed her.

"Actually, I can't remember what it was this time. But I don't think it was lizards."

She tottered a few steps toward me and patted my hand, looking as protective as it is possible for a person who weighs less than 100 pounds to look.

"Well, I think you should talk to someone about those night frights of yours."

"I think they're called 'night terrors,' actually."

She flicked her hand as if to brush my remark away; she plainly felt

that the proper term for the thing was beside the point.

"You should see someone about it. And not just so you'll stop waking me up in the wee hours. I worry about you, sweetie."

"Thank you, Mrs. Flanagan. I'm fine. How have you been?"

She repeated the dismissive hand gesture. "Never mind me. I just keep going."

She slowly began to move her bent form toward the front door, then paused, smiled, and turned back to me.

"You should disable the snooze button on your alarm clock, sweetie. That's what I did for my sleepy old Patrick. He was never late again!"

I held the door for her as she left, thumping her cane and chuckling. Then I held her umbrella and walked her to her enormous, 30-year-old Oldsmobile. Finally, I raced to my own car and sped to work. I was 20 minutes late, but no one seemed to notice.

Work was dull. The time had come to fulfill one of my more pointless duties: composing the quarterly newsletter for the benefits department. This job mainly entails cruising the internet for health-related tips and pointers. This helps my corporate cohorts delude themselves into thinking they'll live forever (or, it would, if they read it, which they don't). I found a recipe for a fluffy, diet-friendly cake ("light in more ways than one," har har), added some water safety guidelines ("for summer!"), dressed it up with a few smiling suns, and slouched back into the rain at 4:30.

The evening was likewise uneventful. Mitch called and invited me out to a bar in Davis Square with several of our friends, but I didn't want to go. I hadn't been sleeping well, and I was tired. Plus, it was still raining. So instead, I spent my Friday evening eating instant noodles and half-watching some sappy television, before calling it an early night.

*Crunch, crunch.*

I dreamed of a lion in a glass cage.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

The lion paced around and around its tiny enclosure. At its feet, several cockroaches skittered on the transparent floor. Whenever the lion saw one, it would extend its purple tongue and slurp it into its mouth, and chew it, *crunch, crunch.*

Then the dream shifted, and the cage and lion were gone, and I seemed to be back in my bedroom. At the foot of the bed was a shadow.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.*

The sound continued, only now it emanated from the shadow, which I now saw was a human figure. It was short, and horribly hunch-backed, but person-shaped. From its hooded head came the crunching sound.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

Again the dreamscape moved beneath me, and I saw the caged lion again. Now it was leg-deep in cockroaches, and more of the insects were tumbling into its cage from above every moment. The beast's eyes rolled with panic, and it gobbled madly at the roaches.

*Crunch, crunch.*

As I watched, the bugs continued to pile up, until only the lion's maned head could be seen above them. The animal thrashed and kicked in the roiling bath of vermin. The insects were crawling on its nose, through its mane, over its desperate eyes, and still it bit and chewed at them.

*Crunch.*

Then the crunching stopped, and I opened my eyes. There was a shadow at the foot of my bed, but it was not the one I'd seen before.

A face peered over edge of the mattress.

I had an impression of: black, shining eyes, reflecting the red digits of my clock radio, 2:13; two yellow teeth, also glistening in the dark, too long to fit in any mouth, sharp beyond belief; a sudden, flickering motion, as the face moved up and over and toward me.

Then I was running, feet hammering the floor, and I was in the bathroom, with the light on and my back pressed against the door and my heartbeat crashing in my ears.

For a while I could hear nothing over my gasping breath.

Gradually, the adrenaline faded, and my nerves cooled. The apartment was quiet. A toilet flushed elsewhere in the building. I turned on the faucet and splashed warm water on my face.

Another night terror. I rubbed my temples and shook my head, frustrated with myself for letting my subconscious run so completely amok.

"I'll hear about this from Mrs. Flanagan."

*CRASH!* Breaking glass in another room in the apartment. Involuntarily, I reeled away from the door as far as I could go, until my back was arched over the sink.

A thud as something hit the floor, in the living room, by the sound of it. Then scuffling sounds; a series of rapid clicks, like claws on wood;

a loud rip.

Then something slid against the very door I was cowering behind, scraping slowly across the wood.

One more thud, then silence. Five minute of silence.

Ten.

Thirty.

I'm ashamed to say it was nearly a full hour before I screwed up enough courage to venture out of the bathroom.

First I stuck my head out and peered into the darkness, like a cartoon burglar. Then I barreled into the kitchen as fast as I could, then the living room, flipping every light switch I could find.

One of the blue porcelain lamps in the living room lay shattered on the floor. Shards of it were scattered from wall to wall. A strip of upholstery hung ragged from the sofa. In the kitchen, the Cheetos bag was on the floor, open, its contents scattered all over the tile.

"Rats," I said aloud.

Saturday afternoon found me in the hardware store, scowling at a row of colorful boxes that promised various methods of rodent annihilation. I had gone to the store with a standard snap trap in mind, but the glue trays and poisons now arrayed before me made me indecisive. I was holding a glue trap in each hand, comparing, when a petite, pony-tailed young woman in a store uniform strode up to me.

"Can I help you with anything? Looking for something more humane?"

She must have interpreted my frown of concentration as an expression of concern for the rats. The thought made me laugh, inwardly.

"Yeah, no, well, actually, I was hoping you could tell me which trap will cause the most anguish."

The girl raised an eyebrow and giggled uncertainly.

"No, I'm serious," I continued. "In their final moments, I would like the rats to go beyond all boundaries of rodent suffering."

I was smiling broadly, but not in jest. The employee paled a little, and then sniffed indignantly, her nose ring trembling. She stalked off, and I started toward the register with a glue trap. Then I stopped in mid-stride, imagining the aftermath. I pictured a rat, its back end stuck to a tray, abdomen to tail, using its hand-like front paws to haul itself across the floor towards my feet, squealing vengefully.

I decided to go with the snap trap after all. On further reflection, I decided to go with five; the destruction in my apartment spoke of

multiple rats.

The tenderhearted girl with the ponytail had to ring up my purchase. She glared the whole time. I thought of explaining to her that my lamp, couch and Cheetos had not been treated humanely, and the perpetrators deserved no better, but I thought better of it.

Mrs. Flanagan was waiting for me in the foyer of the apartment building when I let myself in.

"Another bad night, sweetie." She wasn't inquiring.

"Afraid so. I'm really sorry I keep disturbing you, Mrs. Flanagan."

She held a finger up to her lips, leaning heavily on her cane with the other hand. "There's no need to apologize. You'd better come to my place for some coffee and cookies, sweetie." Again, she wasn't really asking, so I went.

She didn't ask how I took my coffee, either, so I had it the way she had hers: vanilla-white, with about five sugars. I had never been in her apartment before, but it was just how I would have imagined it, all lace, chintz and potpourri.

Mrs. Flanagan handed me a third gingersnap and looked at me sternly. "Have you taken my advice yet?"

I couldn't remember what she was referring to. My mouth was full, so I just gave her a quizzical look.

"Have you talked to someone about your night frights?"

I didn't correct her. "No, I haven't. It's just—I mean, I have a lot of respect for psychiatry—psychology? I always get those confused—but, I just don't see how talking about it is going to help, even if it's with a professional."

Mrs. Flanagan's cup met its saucer with a loud clink. "Oh, sweetie, that's not what I meant. That is, I'm sure it wouldn't hurt you to see a psychiatrist—no offense meant, of course—but I meant talking to someone in a different line of work."

I gave her another puzzled look, though my mouth was empty. I wasn't following.

She put down her cup and saucer entirely, and leaned forward in her flowery armchair.

"I hear you at night, you know. The running and stomping, yes, but more than that. You scream. Did you know that you scream? I don't mind telling you that a few times I've nearly called the police because of it. I thought someone was hurting you, I really did. But then you'd quiet down and I could hear you walk back to your bedroom, so I let it be.

"But that isn't all I hear. There are sounds that come from your apartment in the night that don't come from you. Something else—"

"I know," I interrupted. "I've got something to take care of that." I pulled one of the traps out of my bag.

Mrs. Flanagan stared at it, looking bemused. Then she smiled.

"Well, maybe that will take care of it. I hope so, for both our sakes—after all, if you've got rats, so do I! But just in case it doesn't..."

She fished around in her large purse for a moment, then produced a business card, which she handed to me face down.

"In case the trap doesn't do the trick, take this. Don't look at it yet. You'll just throw it away if you do, I suspect. But don't forget that you have it. You may find that you need it."

I was curious, but I did as she asked, and tucked the card into the back pocket of my jeans, unread.

"There we go," Mrs. Flanagan sighed. "Now, will you stay for dinner? I'm making potato soup and it's hard to make for one."

I did stay for dinner—the potato soup was so good that I asked for the recipe, which Mrs. Flanagan unsmilingly refused to give me—and I ended up staying for a few hours afterward, too, looking at my hostess's old photo albums and talking about her late husband Patrick, who was sweet and gentle but lazy, and their only daughter Siobhan, who was far away in New Mexico managing an art gallery but called almost every day. I was delighted to discover that Mrs. Flanagan's knowledge of the goings-on in our building was not limited to my nocturnal racket; she proved herself a fountain of apartment complex gossip. So it was nearly 10:00 when I turned the key in my own door.

Three Cheetos lay on the floor in the hallway, between the kitchen and my bedroom.

I cursed quietly; the rats were getting bold very quickly, if they were raiding the kitchen in the daytime. I crept cautiously toward the kitchen, watching my periphery for darting shapes.

The kitchen light sputtered once or twice, and then hummed into fluorescent life. Surprisingly, the floor there was clear. Even more surprisingly, the bag of Cheetos was not on the countertop. I turned toward the bedroom, following the orange crumbs.

I did not find the bag in the bedroom either, but there were several more Cheetos on the floor. They lay in a more or less straight line, leading right up to the door of the closet at the foot of my bed.

I should explain something about that closet. Though my apartment is pitifully tiny, it is endowed with two bedroom closets. One of

those is on the side of my bed, and it is there that I hang collared shirts and stash rarely used belongings. The other is at the foot of the bed, and I have opened it no more than once since I moved in.

Now, it seemed, I was paying the price for that neglect, as the unused closet had been converted into a cozy nest for Cheeto-thieving rats.

I couldn't bring myself to open the closet door. I kept picturing a rat (or two, or three—perhaps a dozen! Hundreds!) leaping at me from its hiding place, all incisors and diseases and grasping hands. Instead, I baited my five traps with peanut butter and arranged them all in front of the closet, and promised myself I'd open it and investigate the following day. Then I pulled a blanket and pillow from my bed, and went to the living room to sleep on the couch.

*Crunch, crunch.*

In my dream the earth had a mouth.

The ground gaped. Moss and grass covered its lips; its gums were mud; stones its teeth. It opened and shut lazily, grinding the bones of the dead and buried with its rocky molars.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

A huge blind worm, purple blood visible beneath its translucent skin, acted as the tongue in the earth's mouth. It slid from side to side, pushing femurs, ribs and skulls between the teeth to be crushed and crunched.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.*

Lukewarm breath rose from the great mouth, smelling of dirt and worms and decay. And the mouth was growing now. It yawned wider and wider by the moment, no longer content to feed on the dead. It stretched its earthen jaw, straining to bring living bones into its maw.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

I ran from this nightmare mouth. My feet pounded the earth, but the mud beneath me squelched and sucked at me, slowing my escape. The chasm was inches behind me now, and every second it grew wider, and its stone teeth gnashed hungrily.

*Crunch, crunch.*

I opened my eyes and realized three things.

The first thing I realized was that I had run into the bedroom.

The second was that I had come inches from putting my foot in a snap trap.

The third was that the closet door was open.

There was no avoiding it now. I had to see. I pressed my back

against the wall and slid over to the light switch.

With shaking fingers, I turned on the light.

Slowly, I crossed the room towards the closet. My steps trembled. I beheld the nest.

It was a nest, of sorts. But it wasn't a rat's nest.

A dirty blanket lay across the floor of the closet, rumpled with recent use. At one end of it lay an equally dingy pillow—the stuffing was oozing out of one corner. At the other end of the blanket sat a large, battered cardboard box. And scattered all around were four or five empty Cheetos bags.

Absurdly, I immediately felt relieved that my apartment wasn't infested with rats. That feeling was quickly replaced by incredulity and mounting horror.

Someone had been living in my apartment, right under my nose. Sleeping in my *bedroom*, even. Living off my junk food and squatting in my closet.

How long had this person been there? How could I be so oblivious? Where was the vagrant hiding now?

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

Though I was wide awake, the sound came again, from behind me. I whirled around, and saw a familiar sight: the hooded, hunchbacked little figure I thought I'd dreamed the previous night. It stood in the doorway, and though its huge hood nearly obscured its face, I could now see that it was an old woman. Her face was warty and weather-beaten, and she wore a huge, dirty brown parka that barely contained the hump of her back, despite its voluminous size. When she saw me look at her, she stopped chewing, dropped the bag of Cheetos she'd been holding in her claw-like hands, and turned to run away.

"STOP!" I bellowed at her. To my surprise, she obeyed, and slowly turned back to face me. She looked at me with watery eyes. Their irises were dusty gray, their whites yellowed, their rims red.

"Do not be scared of me, young man, do not," she croaked. Her voice was hoarse, and she spoke with a heavy accent. Russian? Romanian? I couldn't place it.

I gave her what I hoped was a hard stare. "*Me*, scared of *you*? If anyone has a reason to be afraid, it's you, lady. How long have you been squatting in my closet?"

She shrugged. "I've been here since the last place that I was." Her watery gaze didn't flinch from my face.

"Yeah, well, you're not going to be here much longer." It was hard

to keep my voice from quavering. "You're going to stand right there while I call the police, and you're going to keep standing *right* there until they get here. Do you understand?"

I made a move to push past her into the living room, where I'd left my cell phone. She blocked the doorway with her lumpy body, bracing her gnarled hands against the doorframe and planting her booted feet.

"You must not do that, please, I beg you, no!" she squawked.

Her eyes were becoming even more watery now, and I saw a tear slide down her face, leaving a trail in the dirt covering her cheek.

"Look, I'm sorry for you," I said, and I almost was. "I'm sure things are very hard for you. But I can't allow you to be here, you must understand that. There are shelters, homes. This is not a place for you."

The woman sniffed, set her jaw, and tried to straighten up (a pitiful display, given her hunch). "A shelter's not the place I am to be," she pronounced.

I was becoming annoyed now. This woman seemed to think herself entitled to a part of my home. "Lady, you're not the only homeless person in this city. Others go to the shelter. What makes you so different?"

A half-smile brushed the woman's dirty face. "You'd not believe, you would not understand."

"Try me."

She looked at me a moment, then a faraway look came over her, as she meditated on whatever delusions of grandeur haunted her addled brain. As this reverie took her, I seized the opportunity and charged at her, full-speed.

It worked. I knocked her off balance, and she was forced to pivot, putting one foot behind the other to steady herself. That allowed me to dash past her and into the living room, where I grabbed my cell phone and flipped it open.

I was trying to coax my trembling thumb to dial 911 when she came at me, shrieking, her sharp-nailed hands extended. The fingers on her right hand were stained bright orange, and her eyes were mad with desperation.

"Do not, do not, I beg you, listen now!" she howled.

Her nails were inches from my face. I dropped the phone and, without thinking, I lowered my head and bulled into her, my shoulder meeting her abdomen. I pushed her like that down the hallway, while she yelled and pleaded and pulled at my hair, until we came to the front door. This I opened, and shoved her roughly out of the apartment,

and slammed the door.

I watched her a short while, through the peephole. For a few moments she just sat on the carpet in the corridor where she'd fallen, dazed. Then she stood up awkwardly; the hump on her back seemed to give her a strange center of gravity. She paced in front of my door, wringing her hands. Then she paused, and looked in the direction of the peephole, and I had the distinct impression that she saw me. After that, she turned suddenly and stumped off toward the elevators.

I exhaled; I hadn't realized that I'd been holding my breath as I watched her. Then I turned back and picked up the phone again.

"911 emergency."

"Yeah, I'm calling to report a burglary, or, um, breaking and entering, I'm not sure if she stole anything—wait, assault maybe, she sort of—anyway, there was a woman in my apartment."

"Where is the intruder now, sir?"

"I threw her out of the apartment. She'll be either in the building or somewhere nearby."

"So you're alone?"

"Um, yeah."

"Good. Stay there. We'll be there soon."

I sat down on the couch to wait. Ten minutes passed.

A half an hour.

I shifted in my seat and felt something in my back pocket. The card from Mrs. Flanagan. I pulled it out and inspected it. It belonged to one

Father Liam McMurtry

Church of St. Quirinus

I snorted. "I don't need a priest, Mrs. Flanagan. I need a cop."

An hour passed.

You'll think I'm silly for falling asleep, but I was so, so tired.

I don't know what it was that woke me up. I don't remember hearing a noise. But my eyes snapped open and the adrenaline was burning through me again. My breath and my pulse raced.

All of the lights in the apartment were out. Somehow, the green digits on the VCR read 13:2. Beside them loomed a nightmare worse than any of my dreams or terrors.

The few people who have seen one give wildly different descriptions. Now I understand why. In the pale green light, its shape seemed to change depending on the angle, so that if I moved my head slightly, it took on a different appearance. It had a face like a goat, or a laughing man, or a monstrous pig, or a sad-eyed woman, or a spider.



Some of its faces had horns (two or ten I could not tell) and from their sharp points hung scraps of ragged skin. It was all over mouths, in its chest, its abdomen, its groin, its limbs, the palms of its hands. Some mouths were toothless, others horribly fanged. Some vomited black bile; others babbled and yammered in languages beyond human tongues.

Though its aspect was inconstant, I recognized it. Here was the thing that had leered at me over the edge of my bed. Here was the monster that had driven me, panting and sweating, from my sleep so many nights. Here was my night fright, and it was not in my head. It was before me.

It was the huge, toothless mouth in the creature's chest that spoke. The head remained still, grinning at me with the mouth of a snake, a corpse, a jackal.

"It seems we've caught ourselves a little rat," it intoned. Its voice was deep, rich and sexless. It gestured with one chattering hand at the floor; the five traps were now laid out in a semicircle around me. The creature waved a finger, and all five snapped at once. It continued:

"We are surprised that you removed the hag. We did not think it possible for you. We are impressed, and now we wonder if—"

The thing paused in its speech, and chuckled with all its mouths. It took a step toward the couch where I sat. Its face changed: tiger, wasp, Venus flytrap. At the bottom of my vision something blue appeared. A shard of porcelain lay at my feet, protruding from beneath the couch. I leaned forward.

"We wonder if you'd make a decent thrall," the voice from the monster's chest continued. "And almost we regret the work at hand." Another step forward. I leaned further; the shard was within my reach now.

The creature's mouths laughed again, in dozens of different voices. The chest spoke once more.

"But still, we must now execute our task."

The monster raised its dripping arm, extending its hand toward my face. At once, the mouths that covered its body began to bite at the air in anticipation, salivating grotesquely. Then the mouth in the creature's palm spoke, hissing in my ear:

*"And we intend to savor every bit."*

My hand closed around the porcelain shard, and I thrust its point as hard as I could into the hissing hand-mouth. I heard several of its fangs snap, and then the air was full of the angry wails of many

mouths. The monster stumbled backward, clutching its wounded hand to its body, and I pressed my advantage. I leaped up and slashed viciously at the face, which at that moment looked like a hairless rat. The howls rose in pitch and volume. With my fight instinct fading and flight taking over, I jammed the shard into the meaty center of the huge, toothless chest-mouth. The mouth closed around the porcelain and my hand both, sucking horribly. I wrenched my hand away, turned, leaped over the traps, and bolted for the door.

As I pulled at the latch, I heard a spitting sound, and felt the point of the porcelain bury itself in my back. The pain sent me to my knees for a moment, but then I heard the squalling of the monstrous mouths approaching from behind, and I hauled myself up and sprinted down the corridor.

When I reached the door to the stairwell, I looked back. The dark shape of the creature was striding after me, with terrible ease and speed. I saw its fury in each step. The light fixtures in the corridor ceiling flashed and went out as the abomination passed them, so that a wave of darkness pursued me.

I took the steps down to the first floor three at a time.

The sky was still overcast, as it had been all weekend, when I careened out of the building, past the humming red vending machine, and into the parking lot. The clouds glowed orange, reflecting the city's own glow. I ran across the dark pavement until I found myself face to face with the parka-clad old woman.

She looked at me reproachfully, surveying my terrified eyes and bleeding hand. Then, wordlessly, she motioned for me to get behind her. I didn't know what else to do, so I obeyed.

A moment later the horror stepped out of the building and stood under the awning. As it did, the vending machine sputtered and darkened. The creature stared across the parking lot at the old woman. She stared back, and spoke.

"By what name are you called, you wicked beast?"

The thing cackled again before it replied.

"So many nights we've struggled, you and we. We've fought and striven while this mortal slept." It indicated me with its wounded hand, which was seeping dark ichor. "And still you say you do not know my name?"

The woman cocked her head and raised an eyebrow, waiting for an answer to her question. The monster stepped forward and snarled.

"Upon this night, you perish by the hand of Lucifer, the Prince of

Darkness, sow!"

During this speech, the dark terror seemed to grow in height and breadth, and its mouths snapped and slavered. But the old woman let out a laugh, loud and throaty.

"Your kind is always so obsessed with fame," she jeered. "You never cease to claim celebrity. But I have fought with Lucifer, and you..."

She began to laugh again, and hobbled forward, her hump waving from side to side. She stopped a few feet from the thing, and smiled into its shifting face.

"And you, my friend, are sure no Lucifer."

The would-be devil howled furiously, reared back, and spat a clot of black sludge from its chest. The projectile struck the woman square in the chest, and began to sizzle and foam. Before my horrified eyes, her parka took flame, and in moments the garment was roaring with blue-white fire. As it burned, it went to pieces, and blackened scraps of it began to fall away from her still form, revealing what was beneath.

She was not, as it turned out, hunchbacked. Rather, two huge white-plumed wings, free of the confines of her coat, stretched outward and skyward. Two more sprung from the back of her neck, no longer hidden by her hood. All four wings held the bluish flames, but their shining pinions were not consumed. As I watched, she bent to remove her heavy boots, and two more wings sprang free, one from each ankle.

As her dirty clothing burned away, the very appearance of an old woman did as well. She seemed to become taller, slimmer, more muscular. Her skin lost its patchy, sickly color and became like sunlight through amber. Her eyes flashed, her hair flew, and a white garment billowed around her genderless, powerful figure (I continued to think of her as female, though I now think the distinction does not apply).

While this transformation occurred, the dark creature in front of her watched, all of its jaws hanging agape. Now that her true shape was revealed, the thing regained its rage, and sprang toward her, roaring with hate.

In one easy motion, my winged protector brought an arm across her body, as though swinging a tennis racket backhand, and smashed her luminous fist into the monster's formless head. The creature was lifted several feet by the blow, and landed hard on the pavement.

"I think it would be wise for you to go," she said, turning to me. Her voice was an ocean of sound. I turned to run back into the building, but she stopped me with a hand on the shoulder.

"You have been wounded. Let me see that, please," she thundered. The porcelain shard was still stuck in my back. In the midst of everything, I'd forgotten. Now that I remembered, I realized it hurt awfully. I held still and waited.

I think I expected some kind of otherworldly first aid—instant, painless healing. Instead, she just wrenched the shard out of my flesh. It hurt worse now.

I spun around, about to deliver a rebuke to her shining countenance, when fanged hands coiled around her neck from behind, and the evil creature pulled itself up onto her back, rasping and drooling.

She gagged, pulling at the hands on her golden throat. "My sword! My sword! The box, upstairs! My sword!"

I don't remember running back up to the apartment. I rummaged through the cardboard box in the closet, tossing aside filthy rags. I found no sword, but there was a knife or dagger, about nine inches long and badly rusted. I seized it and bolted back through the dark.

My guardian was prostrate now, wings limp. The nightmare thing still had its hands at her throat, and was twitching and grunting over her triumphantly.

I sank the blade into its back before I knew what I was doing. It rounded on me, the knife still jutting from its back. Its hands closed on my face, and I felt tiny teeth gnaw my cheeks. Hot breath blasted me from a dozen throats, stinking like nothing on earth. It slowly began to draw my head toward the huge maw in its abdomen, which bristled with green fangs. I tried to pull away, but the creature was strong beyond hope.

Over its shoulder, I saw wings unfold, and an incandescent form straightened up.

She tore the knife out of the creature. It grew and caught fire in her hand, lengthening into a flaming sword almost as long as she was tall. She gripped it in both hands and swung it in a mighty arc.

After that, my memory becomes very spotty. I remember kneeling on the blacktop, staring at the two smoking heaps of foul flesh that had once been my nighttime tormentor. I remember looking up at the burnished face, framed by wings, and trying to think of something to say. She held up two fingers, then brought them to my mouth, *silence*. The touch seared. I remember lying on the ground, weak with exhaustion and blood loss, and watching her as she strode over to the dead vending machine. She laid a hand on it, and it flickered to life and dispensed a can of Coke, which she opened and drained in one long

pull. Unconsciousness, then.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

I lay on the couch in my apartment, bandaged and sore, on a gray morning. Nearby, in a reclining chair, a hunched old woman sat eating Cheetos and watching an infomercial for the Ronco Rotisserie.

*Crunch, crunch.*

I groaned and struggled to sit upright, using only my left hand to push me up—the right one refused to be a part of it. The wound in my back panged sharply. The lady looked at me as I stirred, and the corners of her mouth rose a fraction of an inch.

I didn't ask her if the events of the previous night had truly taken place. I knew they had. There was another question on my mind.

"Why are you here?"

She looked at me for a long, silent while before she replied.

"Because this is the place I am to be." Her voice was again a raspy, accented croak. "A slave of darkness came, so I did too. We find the places where we can lend aid."

"So you came to protect me from that... thing?"

She considered that a moment, then shrugged and nodded.

"But... why was *it* here? What interest did it have in me?"

Another long pause. The crone's mind seemed very far away. Finally:

"There are some things that we can never know. It is not up to me to know all things. My role is just to go, and guard, and fight. I know not why the demon wanted you."

She leaned closer then, and beckoned me with one orange finger to do the same. Her eyes glinted mischievously.

"Though I admit my curiosity," she confided in a whisper. She settled back into the chair, shaking her head and chuckling quietly to herself. She ate the last Cheeto in the bag.

*Crunch.*

I had one more question for her.

"I don't suppose there's anything I can do for you? To, uh, repay you, or show my gratitude—for saving me?"

She shook her head, smiling broadly, but I thought I caught her casting a wistful eye at the empty bag in her lap.

"Got it," I said, grinning, and rose stiffly from the couch.

That was an hour ago. I've just returned from the convenience store, bearing seven bags of Cheetos and a case of Coke.

The old woman is gone.

There is, in fact, no sign that she was ever here. The pillow, blanket and box have disappeared from the closet. There are no empty bags or cans in the apartment, nor any orange dust on the reclining chair.

Sunset is still hours away. I'm not sure whether I should dread it. And I don't know what I'm going to do with all of these Cheetos. I guess I'll go see if Mrs. Flanagan likes them. She'll probably invite me to stay for dinner. And then I'll wait for night to fall, and see what comes with it. ●



## UNTIL DEATH, I EAT

Scott Bastedo

I shudder as the thick strips of uncooked meat slide over my greasy lips and across my gnarled teeth. I ponder the ramifications of such behavior; and, deciding it is against sound judgment, I shove more into my mouth to dull the pain. This fills me with immeasurable joy, but frightens me more. So I eat out of elation and fear.

People pause as they stroll past me to stare and gawk. I imagine them as various delicacies—pot roasts, stews, shish kabobs, and steaks. The fattier ones I think of as cakes, donuts, pies, even suet. They scurry away when they realize why I am licking my lips—not to remove the accretion of food and saliva, but at them.

"You need to stop," my sister used to say when she visited. She told me what I was doing was wrong and that she wanted to see me outlive our parents. I told her that I could not bear the thought of seeing them die, and I ate more out of the sadness I would feel if I did see them die. She has not stopped by in years. On her last visit, she told me that she could no longer witness me this way, festering like an animal carcass on the side of the road. It made me even hungrier, and I did not hear her leave.

I cry. The salty water seasons the hunks of fatty tissue as they enter my mouth. I only want to want to stop. The food is so delicious, so filling. It begs for me to eat it, and I oblige.

I have finished both legs and the thighs, and I am working on the ribs. Ribs are my favorite because I can gnaw on them. I like to force the bones into my nearly full mouth and tear off the meat with my stump of a tongue and my rotting teeth. I finish the last rib. But now I am thirsty.

I take a swig of diet soda. I do not drink diet to lose weight. It allows me to justify eating more food. And so I take a bite, this time a nice loin. It is sinewy, so I must pick the pieces from my teeth. I cannot let them rot completely. If they rot I will not be able to eat anymore. Perhaps I should let them rot?

I realize I have forgotten the sauce I like to use. "Next time I will

not forget," I say, as I slurp up the last few inches of my own small intestine, much like an undercooked strand of linguini. I cannot eat any more—my guts are full of themselves. I will have to finish in a few hours when I am hungry again, if I live that long. I pray I do not. ●





## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Mike W. Barr (“MageRider,” page 50) is a legendary American comic book writer, the co-creator of *Camelot 3000* and *Batman and the Outsiders*. He has also written for several other comic series that you would recognize including *Captain America* and *The Hulk*, and has published several novels.

Scott Bastedo (“Until Death, I Eat,” page 94) is a Michigan-based writer who currently resides as a graduate student in the Creative Writing program at Central Michigan University. He has been previously published in *The Offbeat* printed by Michigan State University Press.

Steve Calvert (“Animal Rights,” page 71) is a writer from County Durham in the UK. His fiction has appeared in *Hub*, *Necrotic Tissue* and the *I Am This Meat* e-anthology, among other places. Steve's website is <http://www.steve-calvert.co.uk>.

Ivan Green (cover art, “The Tree and the Reed”) is a photographic artist whose portfolio can be seen at <http://web.mac.com/tinydynamite>.

Robert Masterson (“Pickman’s Progeny,” page 17) is an award-winning New York writer, journalist, and English professor whose work has appeared in a wide variety of magazines, anthologies, and websites. His newest book, *Artificial Rats & Electric Cats*, is available through <http://www.camberpress.com>.

Benjamin W. Olson’s (“Night Frights,” page 77) serial novel *Wyrms* can be found at <http://wyrmblog.blogspot.com>.

Derek Rutherford (“Talking About Chet Baker,” page 5) hails from Gloucester, UK. He has previously published in such publications as *The Horror Show*, *All Hallows* and *Well Told Tales*. His website is <http://www.derekrutherford.com>.

Jenny Schwartz (“Market Values,” page 65) is an Australian writer whose short fiction has appeared in *From the Asylum*, *Alienskin*, and *Coyote Wild*. Her first novel, *The Walk Alones*, is available from Double Dragon eBooks.

Jeffrey Scott Sims (“The House on the Hill of Stars,” page 20) is a degreed anthropologist who writes weird fiction in his spare time. He lives in Arizona, the setting for many of his stories.

